VIVANDIÈRE!

PHOEBE
FENWICK
GAYE

Peggy

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BOOK I

THE ROAD TO RUSSIA

BOOK I

THE ROAD TO RUSSIA

I

ON a misty, warm afternoon towards the end of April, the brothers St. Siriac, lieutenants of Dragoons, were holding a garden-party in the grounds of their estate near Versailles. The celebration was a double one: their sister's birthday and their own return from manœuvres. A marquee had been erected, and there sat those who wished to avoid the glare of the sun, and who preferred to enjoy themselves by watching rather than by taking part in the entertainments. Flower beds and fruit trees lined the sides of the broad walk from the gate to the house, and green swards sloped down to the woods which surrounded the St. Siriac estate, woods which, in their turn, were merged into the general landscape of the smiling plains of France. In these woods the guests were amusing themselves by taking stray shots at the squirrels and birds, or disporting themselves with the pretty painted swings, which hung like spiders' webs, their gilded seats glimmering in the sunshine which penetrated the foliage.

In the more open ground, a haze hung over all,

the sort of hovering fine dust that accompanies fine weather and long evenings. The gentlemen, some in uniforms of varied descriptions, and some in civil dress, sipped the wines, leaned tenderly over the chairs, quizzed the dancers from the local theatre through their long-handled glasses, and even in more abandoned moments gave chase, so that the tiny screams of their prey mingled with the cries of the birds in the woods.

Farther down the road, the town was *en fête,* yet not celebrating a feast day so much as giving audible thanks for the great glories which had come to France. In the evening the townspeople would make a pilgrimage to St. Siriac, to watch the fireworks from a distance and stare at the fairy lanterns, which would be shining like fire-flies amongst the trees. These garden-parties were rare, Mam'selle St. Siriac being too delicate to superintend them while her brothers were away, and the old lady having long since lost any interest in anyone but her children, so that the present occasion was rather an important one. After all, a lieutenant of Dragoons, especially the Dragoons of the Emperor himself, knows who's who in Parisian circles, and at the garden-parties one could always depend on conversation with a general, or a glass of wine with a really important secretary. To-day the guest of honour had not yet arrived. . . . Meanwhile, the guests hung about, lazily, like bees before a swarm, passing

and repassing each other in a kind of quiet frenzy, tasting this, and sipping that, but obviously waiting for something which should engage their whole attention. They had paid their respects to the old lady, and complimented Mam'selle on her brothers' return. Perhaps they had even taken a promenade with one of them, asking in a casual way after the Emperor. . . . But now, things seemed to be suspended. The younger Dragoon, Paul, had been seen in earnest conversation with a domestic, while he constantly strained his eyes to look down the road which led to the town. The guests looked too. There was nothing to be seen at all. The garden-party itself seemed to be a little island, far away from the rest of the world, and quite forgotten.

To the left rose the hills, covered with grazing sheep, and, keeping time with the peaceful times of their country, came the echoes of the sheep-bells, like so many tiny church chimes calling to prayer. The sheep-bells tinkled, the violins played, the dancers danced, and the combined laughter and chatter of a hundred guests rose into the air like smoke, hung there a second, and faded away. There was something missing, but everybody was prepared to wait for it. The elder St. Siriac, Gervais, was now seen approaching from the house, his handsome boy's face creased with worry.

"I apologise a thousand times," he said. "We

had invited the Russian Minister of War to be present this afternoon. I have just received news that he has a very bad headache, and has been ordered quiet and rest. . . ." A pause. The guests waited expectantly. "We have prevailed upon Madame Clovis to sing for us," he said.

The tension broke, and smiles spread like ripples on a pool. *This* would be something to talk about at home. After all, a minister more or less —but the singer from Montmartre! The men straightened themselves up, the women whispered together, and Madame Clovis, dressed transparently and admirably *à l'hypocrite,* stood among the bluebells, waiting to begin. . . .

2

And the Russian Minister of War was speeding, speeding, speeding away, through hills and valleys, over bridges, over plains and rocky ways, fleeing from France. From horseback to barouche, and back again, on and on from the crowded town roads to the solitary mountain paths he sped, breathless. Trees shivered together at his coming, "Tchernicheff! Tchernicheff!" woods whispered together, and the rocky cliffs above him cast down huge blue shadows at his feet to snare him. But he feared another Shadow, which was spreading over Europe. . . . Rain came in early mornings. His stirrups rusted and his clothes were sodden through. Hard sunshine came, and a

blinding dust, and creaking carriage-wheels. Several times he had made long detours, and half killed his horses for the time he lost on them. The garden-party at Versailles had gone the way of all garden-parties when he reached the frontier, but the Shadow still pursued. At last he could snap his fingers at it. He stood by the side of a stream, watering his horse, and did so. Scudding clouds obscured the moon. . . .

In Paris the news burned along the boulevards, "Tchernicheff has left the Embassy! The Russian Minister of War has left for Moscow!"

And the story of a Bad Headache went very well at Paris dinner-tables.

3

"ST. SIRIAC,
"*May* 12.

"MY DEAR BROTHERS,

"This ought to reach you at Dresden. Maman was very distressed that Paul hadn't time to say good-bye to her before he left. She continually harps on the subject until my life is a perfect burden. If I didn't suffer so much from stomach trouble it would be easier to bear, but I am a victim to that too. Whatever I eat causes me intense pain, and often I cannot keep my food down. I dread to think how I shall fare through the hot weather. Dr. Simone does his best, and has tried several remedies, all to no effect. The trees are

coming on well, but last week the boys from the School of the Sacred Heart found a gap in the hedge, and three of the finest trees are now stripped absolutely bare! We have sent a protest to the priest, who says he will try to identify the boys, but that since the news of this new campaign broke out they all fancy they can behave like ruffians. Maman wants to know if Gervais took the second pair of breeches that was hanging over the top of the stairs? Please one of you send a note if you can, answering this. They were meant for him in the first place, but if he never took them we think the stable-boy (who really has no business in the house, but being the cook's nephew we find it difficult to keep him out of it) may have made off with them. It would be too bad if he had, as we have missed several little things in the same way. Maman sends her love to both of you, and Lotte says be sure to get decorated, but keep out of danger. As you will be back before the winter, I have decided not to send on the heavy clothes, especially when there is a risk of their not reaching you. Bring me something pretty from Moscow.

"Your loving sister,

"BABA ST. SIRIAC."

Gervais, lying at full length in a battered armchair, a panting servant struggling with the buttons of his long black gaiters, laughed as he

folded the letter up. The mess-room was crowded, and the atmosphere heavy with wine fumes and tobacco smoke. Through the clouded window was a square, alive with men from different regiments, jostling, laughing, asking the way, being directed, bargaining, ogling, and, in a remote corner, some recalcitrant company drilling under the eye of a sergeant. A vast kaleidoscope of colour set in motion, and a proud advertisement of the variety and strength of the Grand Army! Yet, threading like a little worn-out ribbon through this panorama, came the latest arrivals, heavy-footed, boots and eyelashes covered in white dust, and bewildered with the dazzling light and colour. . . . All day long the square was crowded with jostling, laughing, happy men out for excitement, and all day long the thin, dusty ribbon of new arrivals came in, and the two mixed, but never mingled. . . .

"Hi, Brigette, seen my young brother?"

"Not since early morning. He was out in the stables then. D'you want him?"

"No, but there's a letter from the family. . . . Jean!"—to his servant—

"Sir?"

"Did you see a second pair of breeches when you unpacked?"

"Regimental breeches, sir?"

"No, ordinary ones. . . ."

The servant went to look. Gervais continued

buttoning up the rest of his gaiters himself. "It's an awful thing to have a careful sister, Brigette. It damps one's ardour. I can't get up any enthusiasm about this campaign until I can satisfy her about those breeches. She thinks the boy from the stables has taken them. He'll get dismissed . . . then the cook'll go, and I shall get another long letter of complaints." He sighed with a sort of humorous hopelessness, and rose, stretching his long limbs. "Coming out?" Brigette and he went out together.

4

Dresden was the point whereto every soldier of the Empire, and several other empires, converged. Dresden was the dress rehearsal of the campaign. Battalions from Saxony, Brandenburg, Württemberg, Bavaria, from Westphalia, Mecklenburg, Bohemia and Austria, even from Italy, went in like the spokes of a wheel to the hub of Dresden. There was to be the most brilliant conference in the world, of the most brilliant generals in the world. There, kings would be kept sitting on hard chairs in waiting-rooms, to salaam to the Emperor of France. This campaign should rank as the most perfect, the most highly organised the world had ever seen! The only difficulty was to find a reason for it all. Still, they could do that at the conference. Somebody could write, "What about Liberation of Poland?"

on the back of their more important notes, and, when there was a lull in the conversation, they could get up and say it. It might go down very well.

It *did* go down very well. . . .

Meanwhile, army corps of Cavalry, Artillery, Foot-Artillery, Hussars, Light Hussars, Cuirassiers, Dragoons, and their accompanying bakers, butchers, masons, tailors, shoemakers, cooks, and smiths, and, of course, doctors and surgeons—hundreds of thousands of men and horses, swept on to Dresden, the first camp. And behind came the camp followers: cantiniers and their wives, and vivandiers, and those who took to it with nothing to sell but themselves. They, too, converged upon Dresden, and, when they got there, slept like gypsies, outside the town itself but near enough to barter goods. Later they would mingle freely with the troops, although in these enlightened days all sorts of tiresome regulations and restrictions were creeping in—papers to sign, and rules to keep, and boundaries and whatnot. But war means soldiers, and soldiers mean customers, and customers mean Money! So they came on to Dresden.

5

"Have you heard the news? Mother Gateau's eldest has turned vivandière on her own account!"

Soldiers camping in a barn turned to the speaker, a ginger-headed little man with clothes

already in rags, although they had been handed out only a week before. Renard was renowned for wearing out a uniform faster than the worst washerwoman, for the simple reason that he never removed it once it was on.

"How d'you know?"

"Because I guessed first, and found out afterwards. Mother Gateau's been in a foul temper for the past week, refusing credit even to lieutenant-colonels. It turns out that her Julie has left her to start on her own."

"I don't wonder. She treated the girl abominably."

"She says it's a bloody ungrateful way of repaying her for all her care."

"She's got nobody now to wash up the cups—not that she was ever very particular about that."

"She's got nobody now to look after the kids when she's too blind to do it herself."

"What does Papa say?"

"Lies low and holds his tongue. He'll miss Julie when it comes to barracking in the open."

"How's she beginning—with a wagon?"

"No, she hadn't got enough saved for a wagon—a mule. She bought it at the horse-fair last week. She's had enough of putting her shoulder to a wheel up to the axle in mud, besides."

"Mother Gateau says she can whistle for customers and be damned to her."

"And Julie says she'll join another regiment

where she hasn't to deal with a dirty, low, thieving old woman without a tooth in her head, and too soused to count the change."

"Mother Gateau says . . ." and so on, until "Lights out."

Julie was arguing about prices with the German wine merchant in the town. Leaning over the counter in his dark little shop, her brown hands straightening out his list of wines, she read them out to herself in an undertone. A candle stuck in a bottle glimmered palely over the paper and did little else. The merchant recognised that he had to deal with a capable, if not particular, connoisseur of wines and spirits. From his six feet he looked down on to her bent, dark head, the hair clinging closely round brow and neck, and not unlike the cut of a soldier's hair. A dirty dolman jacket, marked with the traces of innumerable "frogs" which had long since vanished, faded and worn on the shoulders and fitting abominably, covered her to the waist, whence a voluminous grey skirt hung in folds like a Flemish picture, the eternal red and white striped petticoat showing whenever she moved. Down in the sawdust her sabots shifted and shuffled, as she altered her position to catch the candlelight. Her remarks, when she made any, were laconic—her offers were final with the finality of death. He brought samples which she tasted by thrusting her fingers into the neck of the bottle and sucking them.

Once, when he had produced an especially poor Burgundy, he caught her brown eyes fixed on him with a reproachful stare, appalling in its intensity and length. Julie, at sixteen, knew her fellowmen. At the end, she paid carefully out of a little brown bag hidden in her bosom.

"I will call for them to-morrow," she said.

Since the arrival of the soldiers in that town she had been sleeping under a flour wagon, with her precious mule tethered to the wheel. A week before she had left the cantinier's wagon, where she had been born and bred, with numerous brothers and sisters, whose best point, perhaps, was their variety, for certainly few of them had had the same father. The present cantinier was a mild little man, with a head sunk down between his shoulders, whether to avoid the sound of the cannon or apprehended blows from his wife, nobody could say. She had found him on a battlefield once, and, as her own "protector" had been shot the day before for plundering out of hours, had adopted him on the spot. Certainly not out of pity, but perhaps because her keen eyes saw, under the valet of the Austrian grandee, the soul of the grocer. He made an adequate cantinier, and, indeed, it was under his influence that Julie had learned to read, painfully but doggedly, so that she too might make those little lists which, in some marvellous fashion, enabled one to keep tally of the I.O.U.'s. Always she had had in her

mind this wonderful time, when she should set up on her own, away from the crying children and the swearing mother and the weak little cantinier, who was afraid to go near enough to the firing lines to make any profits worth mentioning. Now this new campaign had given her the chance. Walking down the long, dark street to the huddled group of wagons, she snuffed at the air as if she drew in freedom with each breath, and walked on with the long, shuffling steps which years of sabots had forced on her. An ungainly walk, yet one which showed determination, and the swing of the skirts, rhythmically from side to side, made her look like the dancer of a slow pavane.

On the way, she passed houses with lights in the windows (with the billeted soldiers safe inside making love to the daughter of the house) and farmyards, with flies dancing over the manure heaps, in a blue gloom. From the barns she could hear the men singing, and playing on the instruments they had brought with them. Farther on still came the choppy sounds of horses' hoofs from the stables, and the reassuring voices of the grooms. Before her, a half-dozen of indignant ducks and a drake, turned from their quarters for the night, made a little white procession back to the pond again. She thought: "Poor ducks—they don't like the change we have made in their lives. They like going to swim in the same place every day, and sleeping in the same place every

night. I should go mad if I had to do that. Poor ducks!" A figure was sitting on the stone wall of the bridge over which she had to pass to reach the wagons. As she drew near she recognised it for a smith named Gibeau, a jovial man, and one of her lovers. He stood up as she approached and tried to catch her to him, but she wriggled away.

"Coming with me to-night?"

"No."

"O-ho! We're very haughty since we've started on our own! Quite the little princess." (A joke that always infuriated the vivandière, referring as it did to the royal blood of her problematical father.)

"Come now, give me a kiss."

"No. I'm not having any more to do with you —I'm on my own now. I've got to make my business pay."

"Oh—so you're going in for it professionally, are you?"

"What professionally?"

"Why," he laughed, looking down at her, "loving."

She looked at him as if he were drunk, and not worth taking seriously, but all the same she held him there with her serious eyes fixed on him, then looking away she said quite lightly, "No, I'm a vivandière."

"You can love me just the same. Come." He took her by the hand. "I'll see to it you don't

lose when we get to Moscow. You loved me once, you know."

"That was before I had started on my own," she said. "I'm not going to have any more truck with the army, except selling things to them. There'll be women enough for what *you* want later on." A slight scorn sounded in her voice, weary with the bargaining of the day, and taking her eyes off him she fixed them ahead of her, as if already she saw the women she spoke about, then gently disengaging her hand, she went on, with her heavy skirts swinging about her, and disappeared in the darkness. . . .

Night rested over Europe, a warm summer's night. The camps slept. . . . And behind the camps the cantiniers and the vivandiers slept, under the stifling heat of the canvas covers of their wagons. The only sound was the wind in the trees, or a child waking and whimpering, or the horses' hoofs as they shifted their weight.

6

As well as wines and spirits, Julie intended to sell less expensive things. In an Austrian campaign once, she had looted a particularly commodious coffee-pot of pewter, and had it now hanging on a special little hook at the back of her saddle. She would sell bread too, and when they got into Germany perhaps one might stock a supply of sausages. Of course there was little

hope of doing any trade until the war had really begun. People weren't really hungry yet because, besides the regulation allowance that had been allotted to each man, all the townspeople were so pleased to see them that they pressed all manner of eatables into the soldiers' hands. So far, the women followers had fared rather badly. The townsfolk imagined that they were an unnecessary drag on an army. Poor fools! Did they think the women could live on air any more than the men could, especially when they had no regular allowance? All sorts of highfalutin ideas were going the rounds, about women not being allowed to accompany the troops in the near future. Somebody had said something about these "enlightened times" and the "gentler sex." Pack of nonsense!

Next morning Julie was up bright and early to call for her wines. There was nothing for breakfast, and no soldiers to beg it from as yet, as they were all busy with the horses. But on her way back from the wineshop, leading her mule gently for fear of spilling the precious burden, she saw a wagon to the side of the road, half hidden by some trees, which she had missed the night before. A delicious smell of frying fat rose into the air. She came nearer, puzzling her head whose wagon it might be. There were several families in the cantinier business, and she knew those who served the regiments adjoining hers, although

they each kept severely to their own customers. And now *she* had no customers at all! She peeped round the edge of the canvas and her heart sank. It was her mother's wagon. Half a dozen children were seated round the smoky fire, and sizzling on a home-made spit was a sucking-pig, kidnapped from the sow's side the night before under cover of darkness. The pig put an idea into her head, and she was withdrawing quietly when her mule trod on a twig, and Mother Gateau, who had been turning the spit, looked up. A dirty cloth was tied round her head and under her chin, which projected like a witch's. Her face was tanned almost black and was so creased that it resembled a ploughed field. From various places under the cloth, wiry grey hair fell down on to her shoulders. She stared at her daughter, with bleared blue eyes still rimmed with the red that the dust of the day before had produced. The children looked up too, with the same calculating stare.

"You can go to hell," Mother Gateau said, "you dirty, ungrateful, good-for-nothing slut! You'll get nothing here!"

As if she had not spoken, Julie said: "Where's Thérèse?" Thérèse was the last baby, and suffered from being occasionally forgotten—put down somewhere and just left. Julie was half afraid that the unfortunate infant was still in the home-made cradle (half a barrel) in the quar-

ters where they lived in peace-time. One of the children answered:

"Papa has her in there," pointing to the dark interior of the cart. "She's been sick all night."

Drawing back a corner of the canvas, Julie saw the little hunchback with the baby in his arms, crooning softly as he rocked it to and fro. The light made him blink, and he smiled when he saw Julie, at the same time putting his finger to his lips.

"Is she bad?" Julie whispered.

He blinked again, and compressing his lips, nodded. Then he spoke. "We've no milk for her," he said. "Your mother sent the children out to look, but they are frightened of the farm folk, especially as the pig squealed so when they took it. She's so thirsty," he added, looking down at the crinkled thing that lay supine in his arms, as if it had wisely made up its mind to die at the earliest possible minute. One tiny hand, with the fist slowly clenching and unclenching, beat against his breast with the weight of a snowflake. But the nails of the hand were incredibly black. The hunchback went on speaking in a mournful, husky whisper, rocking and rocking.

"I've tried her with rum," he said, "and brandy and vermouth—she just brings them up again. I'd even try her with water," he said, "but it's so unsafe." He drew a filthy rag from his pocket and wiped the baby's nose, leaving a sort of first

layer of sawdust over its face. He had used the rag the day before for cleaning shelves. "You never know with water," he said again.

Julie sighed in complete agreement with him. She knew the baby would die whether it had milk or not. She'd seen so many like it. Two of its sisters, a year or so before, had come into the world together, perhaps for company, and after taking one look at their parents with their astonishing blue eyes, they had just lain still till they died. They came so clean, and they went so dirty —it was always the way.

The mule, tired of standing still, shifted again. Julie let the canvas fall, and went slowly back to the road. The children hardly saw her go, so intent were they on the pig. Her mother shouted something after her, but she was thinking of the waste of the baby ever having been born, and of her own breakfast, and kept her eyes fixed on the road before her. . . . The pig—the pig . . . what had the pig reminded her of? Of course, farmyards. Hens. Eggs. Poor baby. If only the hen doesn't cackle—if only the dog's nowhere about. She came to the farmyard she had passed on the night before. Soldiers, their first job finished, were basking in the sun at the side of the wall, some leaning, some sitting on it. They gave her a "Good morning" as she approached.

"Hi, Julie! Hi, vivandière! How's the old hag? Made it up with her yet? Where d'you

get the mule from? Sergeant missed one from the stables yesterday. You'll catch it!"

Slowly she came on, until she was level with them, then turning her head and thrusting back the heavy black hair from her eyes, she smiled slowly, screwing her eyes up in the sun and looking round to see if she knew any of the faces. She was too hungry to chaff and joke with them, and was just going to ask where the hens were kept, when a boy at the end of the row, his red uniform unbuttoned at the neck, asked:

"Had any breakfast?"

"No—and I'm starving," she said.

With tremendous aplomb, as though he were doing a conjuring trick, he produced an egg from his pocket.

"I'll give you this for a kiss," he said.

The soldiers laughed and drew closer, leaning on their elbows over the wall to see what she would do. She came nearer, and lifted up her face. Still laughing, he kissed her. She reached out her hand for the egg and took it, holding it thoughtfully as she moved away, cogitating as to the best way of making one egg taste like three. Behind her, the men were commiserating the boy on his poor luck. No squealings, no ticklings, nothing. That was just it. You never got any excitement out of a vivandière, unless you were specially favoured. Still—there would be women in Moscow!

And now that big wheel, the spokes of which led in to the hub of Dresden, took on strange magical properties, and became a Catherine wheel, slowly but fierily revolving, gathering fresh impetus from every circle it described, throwing off sparks into the night. . . . It began to lose the shape of a wheel and uncoiled and intertwined, and unwound, stretching its huge length, now more a serpent than a wheel, moving along the ground, halting and moving again steadily to the frontier. If the people of Europe could have stood upon the mountain tops, they would have said: "Look at that huge serpent uncoiling itself in the valleys below us!" But they were not far enough off to see the thing in true perspective.

7

A captain of Dragoons was sitting at a table in a stuffy room, completely dressed except for his boots, which always hurt unless he was on horseback. In one hand he held a paper which he had been studying for half an hour, and in the other he held *Bivouacs and How to Make Them,* which began: "First find a woody part of the country, and set your troops to work with axes. Secondly —" and so forth. This remarkable catalogue of information was being used to keep off flies. In front of him stood a couple of stolid peasants, with their heads uncovered, the man in front supported morally by frequent prods from his wife.

"You say this man slept in your barn three days ago," he said.

"Eh?"

"I say you say this man slept in your barn three days ago."

"Yes," broke in the woman, "I should know him. He stole my best layer!"

The captain interrupted her with the patient formula, "That shall be attended to." He didn't believe her. All these peasants believed they could impose on people like this. Why, often the soldiers hadn't been in the town for more than half an hour before the Town Hall was crowded with complainants, shrieking out fantastic tales about Rape and Murder and Robbery, and the minute you kowtowed to them and paid them damages they went home, and told all their relations how easy it was to fool a soldier. Anyhow, *he* was not that kind. (But he was glad, all the same, that somebody had invented the little bit about "That shall be attended to." It was a great help in times of stress.)

He scratched at his untidy head, pushing the hair back, then began again.

"Describe him," he said. . . . Silence. . . . The woman prodded the man.

"Eh?" he said.

"I want you to describe the fellow to me. Was he tall or short?"

"A little man," said the woman, "or he couldn't have got into my fowl-house."

"What else?"

"Oh, nothing . . . just like anybody else."

"Did you hear him say anything—about deserting?" said the captain.

The man looked blank, and turned to his wife who, suddenly realising that with the soldier had gone her hopes of compensation (for how can one prove the theft of a hen unless one produces the thief also?), threw her apron over her head, and began a wail that set the windows rattling in their sockets. Down went *Bivouacs and How to Make Them,* and up came the hand-bell, ringing above the din of the woman's cries. A huge sergeant, complete in the tall pointed hat of his regiment, stood in the doorway.

"Take these away!" shouted the captain. "I can't get a word of sense out of them! And send Lieutenant St. Siriac to me!"

They were outside in half a second, probably with the aid of a boot. He could hear the woman go moaning away into the distance. Then silence, and a fly began buzzing against the pane. He put his head down on his arms, resting on the table, and began to regret Paris and the coolness of the Bois. . . . Just about now, he supposed, his cousins were sitting down to tea. His three Muses. That had been a joke of his which had

gone down very well. And only a month ago he was walking with them in the park, two on one side, and one—the favourite—on the other. Sidonie. . . . That was a cool sort of name, if you like. She had worn a cool green muslin dress, like water, and not so transparent as some. It's funny how you like to see all the other women half-naked, but not the one you love. . . . He had promised to bring them all something back from Moscow. Perhaps from St. Petersburg, too. Soothed by the steady buzzing of the fly, he began to dream of his homecoming. It should be in the garden. He would come strolling up the lawn, and Sidonie would see him from far off and come flying to him, like a bird across the grass . . . like a bird. . . . Somebody coughed. St. Siriac was standing there.

"Oh, St. Siriac, it's about this blasted chap in the second company I want to see you. He's disappeared. I had the people where he was billeted up before me, but couldn't get anything out of them but complaints. We must do something about it. This sort of thing spoils the morale of the troops. I want you to—to—"

"Sir?"

"Oh, yes," he laughed. "My mind wandered. I couldn't think what I was talking about. His name's Cornet, Guillaume Cornet." He leant forward, and went on giving the particulars to Ger-

vais, still with his head in his hands. Gervais saluted and went out. The captain rose and stretched himself, walking about the room softly in his stockinged feet. The sergeant came in.

"Another one to see you, sir. Something about his daughter."

"Very well, very well." He was back in his seat. Never do to let a peasant see he'd not got his boots on. Daughter, water . . . a green dress like water. The door opened and shut. An elderly man, ashy pale, stood before him, his head bare and his eyes starting out of his head with a piteous intensity. A little lump in his stringy throat went up and down, up and down, as if it were preventing him speaking. He twisted his cap in his hands as if it were a rosary.

"Yes, my man?" said the captain. . . .

Still he stood there, his throat working, his eyes staring, the poor cap going round and round between his fingers. "I—" he began, and went on, "I—I—my daughter . . ." As if no further words would come, he put one trembling hand to his throat, then upwards trembling to his trembling mouth, then covering his staring eyes.

"What does he expect me to do?" thought the captain. "What does he think I can give him for comfort? Am I God?" As he rang the bell for the sergeant to show him out, he smiled across the table, saying: "It will be all right. You shall see. It shall be attended to."

8

We meet so few coincidences in the world ourselves that we grow to think they are few and far between, but there are many coincidences that do not come our way. There is the twig that, having fallen into the river, remains in the whirlpool, borne round and round by the current, instead of being carried out to sea, until another twig, which grew from the seed which was brother to the seed of the first twig, is swept down by the mountain stream into the very whirlpool where the other lies. There are the two ants who, among a thousand others, by many infinitesimal obstacles are prevented from going in diverse paths, and are even brought together by them. Hundreds of fragments in the world are thus drawn together, as if by invisible wires, until they meet, no matter how great the distance that separates them, or how unknown the meeting-place. Some small unremembered accident, like the puff of wind that blew the twig from the tree in autumn, or the stone that turned one ant into the path of another, is the beginning of the coincidence, just as the accident of the choice of St. Siriac to round up a deserter is the coincidence that brings together these lovers, who would otherwise never have met, all their lives long.

If we could have stood on the mountains, and watched the tiny specks moving down below, and

seen the one which was Gervais out of all the others, suddenly and inexplicably turn and go backwards towards the place he had come from the day before, and seen too the one which was Julie, moving forward clearly through the masses which surrounded her, nearer and nearer, until they both approached the meeting-place, we should have been astounded at a precision so mathematically accurate. We should have been astounded, too, at the poetry—the sonnet-like and steady sequence of their approach, the regularity of their footfalls. So little a thing might have lost the magic of the meeting—a nail out of Gervais' mare's shoe—an extra customer for the vivandière—a sudden fall of rain—but none of these occurred.

Slowly and surely, Gervais returned on his errand, though the tide of men swept onwards against him. Slowly and surely the vivandière came on with that tide, finding rest in its restlessness, knowing little and caring less for what lay before her, except that she might be able to earn her living.

9

The Grand Army elongated as it advanced. Where thick bunches of regiments had before been huddled together, now advanced a neat, nicely organised line, marching four abreast, with a mounted officer leading, on a horse that no longer agitated its rider and the front line by being too

fresh. The advance guard, as usual, came in for the handkerchief-waving and cheering crowds, and pretty faces smiling down from the balconies. The sequent soldiers were never received with such enthusiasm. Perhaps the towns were tired of the eternal red and blue, red and blue of the uniforms, of the tiresome drums that announced the approach of the next batch, of the inevitable dirt and untidiness left in their wake. For the rear part of the army were reserved the dark looks, the frowning faces behind closed windows, the exaggerated bills of indemnities that were thrust into the astonished officer's hands. Only the patient trees still lined the roads for them, covered with blossom. The men sang as they marched, muskets all atilt, the beards of the veterans and the locks of the younger men blown backwards by the wind. Sometimes they sang:

"Madame Angot s'avance,
Mironton mironton mirontaine.
Madame Angot s'avance,
Bien vite à petits pas . . .
On lui donne les bras
De peur qu'elle ne tombat!"

Or else they made up weird rhythmical exercises of the names of villages and towns:

"Maninghen,
Elchingen,
Bouquingen,
Wachingen,

Ledinghen,
Hardinghen,
Lattinghen,
Tardinghen!"

Towards evening, however, they always tired. The equipment for this campaign was heavier than usual, being fifty-eight pounds weight, and including, much to their annoyance, a complete change of clothes. And who wants to go about carrying two extra pairs of shoes, like a pack mule? The Italians still sang in the long evenings, using plaintive guitars as they bivouacked in the open. The French troops eyed them with suspicion, lying curled up in their blankets, using the hated knapsacks for pillows. And the Hessians and Westphalians, giants of men beside the southern races, talked in quiet voices by the camp fires.

In the morning the march would begin again, to all appearances a triumphal progress. If men were machines, it would have been. Alas, there were always some who "forgot there was a war on," and tired of it before a shot was fired, like Guillaume Cornet. Nearly every company could point to a gap in the ranks already. If one could have *left* these idiots to desert—and shown them how much their absence mattered! But one couldn't. Always one had to attend little conferences about it—always some unfortunate was sent speeding back the way he had come, to act as an

overtaking Justice, and nine times out of ten one caught one's regiment up a week later, quite breathless, with something about "inability to trace." It was annoying. It was bad for the morale of the troops, but one comforted oneself with the thought that it was the elimination of the unfit. That was some consolation, especially if one hadn't been able to trace the brute.

So the march continued, upwards to Danzig by way of Posen and Thorn. And always against the advancing troops went the Overtaking Justices, who never quite overtook.

Gervais was back in the town he had vacated the day before. Pleasantly tired, he tethered his mare to a chestnut tree that stood in the square, and set about finding the Town Hall. As usual, the streets were full of the troops who had just arrived and were looking for billets, and of those gayer spirits who were out for a lark. Elbowing through the crowds of men, and edging through the groups of giggling girls, he at last reached the most massive building he could find, which *was* the Town Hall, and went in.

The waiting-room was crowded with civilians, all with lists of damages in their hands. A further flight of stairs took him to the Mayor's own room, but a sentry prevented him from entering.

"My business is urgent," said Gervais, impatiently.

"It's no good, sir," answered the soldier. "It's

been market day here, and the farmers are in with him. He's probably half-seas over by now."

"Your commanding officer," said Gervais, "who's he?"

"Duke of Elchingen, sir. He's seeing people in there," pointing to a little room. "Shall I show you to the waiting-room, sir?"

Too tired to insist on immediate admittance, especially to so important a person, the dragoon nodded, and was shown into a room to the left, dark and very bare, with only two benches and a table in it. He seated himself heavily, brushing the dust from his coat and breeches, then leaning back, his head resting against the wall, began to examine the room. A typical waiting-room, with the distempered walls scrawled with names and imprecations, a hook behind the door with a cartridge belt hanging from it the only sign of military occupation. Round the walls, as a sort of melancholy reminder, hung maps of the surrounding country, the town as it had been, the town as it was. . . . A portrait of the last Mayor, a testimonial about somebody's gratitude and somebody's worth. A shield inscribed with the arms of the duchy of the town. Another portrait of the present Duke's father as a child. All very boring.

His head was dropping forward on to his chest, in a wakeful doze, when he heard a sound like the scraping of a shoe. Somebody else, confound

them, in the same room! Somebody else who was going to get that interview first. He raised his heavy eyes again, and looked in the direction whence the sound had come. It was from the bench on the far side of the table. Somebody was lying full stretched on it—that was why he hadn't seen him. He rose quietly and walked to the table.

Stretched along the bench lay Julie, on her side, her head resting in the curve of her arm, her mouth slightly open, sleeping as a child sleeps, perfectly silently. The heavy sabot had dragged one foot forward, so that it hung awkwardly over the ground. That was the sound he had heard. Along the oval of her cheek ran a thin line of light, let in by the grudging window. It traced out the delicate moulding of her features, the little hollow above the lips and below them, the mouth itself, bountifully full in sleep. It was so long since Gervais had seen anything so calm, so completely still, that he was surprised into an intense contemplation, such as one gives to the first flower in an empty bed, after winter. The faded stained jacket, left open at the neck from the heat of the day, seemed to him to be the brown sheath of a narcissus, soon to be discarded, soon to show the tender freshness of the flower beneath. With an almost physical pain he felt the hurt that the heavy shoe must be giving her, as the foot hung there without support. As he stepped forward to adjust it, at that moment her eyes opened and,

being on a level with his hands, travelled slowly upwards from there to his face. So they contemplated each other, without haste. She wondered at the strange uniform, guessing that it was from some regiment outside her knowledge, and she wondered yet more at the expression of the face above it. Soldiers did not look like that unless they were drunk, or drowsy with passion, and then there was something—well—not so *surprised* in their looks. They fidgeted more, too. He was just—still. And not because he was an officer either, because, in her limited experience of officers, they were fidgety too, and full of remarks which one was meant to find amusing.

The light which had revealed her features now showed his; the brow, broad and honest-looking, from which the chestnut hair swept back to a queue ending in the regulation length of black worsted, the rather high-bridged nose, and the clean-shaven lip and chin beneath. That was the part that astonished Julie, because there was a saying in France in those days, that nobody was clean-shaven except women, little boys and the Emperor. Surely it was rather presumptuous to imitate the Emperor? Suddenly she sat up, rubbing with her finger inside the sabot to mitigate the soreness, and the shoulder-strap which held the barrel (although no barrel was there at the moment) slipped forward, and he knew her for a vivandière.

"How did you get admitted here?" he said.

"I asked to see the Commanding Officer in the town," she answered. "I came in with the 29th company of Foot Artillery, but I want another regiment instead."

"And did you really mean to bother the Duke about a thing like that?" he asked, his shoulders shaking in a silent laughter, until he saw that she didn't understand, but sat looking at him, her head on one side, like an intelligent fox-terrier. He went on more quietly: "There's a war on, my dear —the Duke's very busy. He can't be pestered by vivandières, even pretty ones like you."

"Then what am I to do? Who can I apply to?" she asked. "I *must* have a regiment or I shan't be able to live."

"Oh—I should go home if I were you," he said.

She suddenly smiled at him, radiantly. Of course, that was why he was clean-shaven, he was only a boy after all, or he wouldn't say such stupid things. Home! . . . It was her turn to laugh. She adopted the motherly tone.

"When you've been through as many campaigns as I have," she said, "you won't talk about home."

"But you're only a child!"

"No. I'm a vivandière."

Half an hour later the soldier who had been on duty in the hall grew tired of listening to the bawdy stories that the farmers were telling the

Mayor, and went along to the little room where the Duke of Elchingen held court. Looking through the keyhole, he saw that the group inside were still busy over the map, the Duke himself, two colonels, and a master of camp. He strained eyes and ears, but could catch nothing, so he busied himself in leaning over the banisters and ogling the peasant girls who were thronging the hall beneath. Engaged in this pleasant occupation, he failed to hear the door open behind him, until he was saluted upon a particularly tender part with a heavy boot, which caused him to stand at attention in the quickest possible way. A glowering master of camp, with ferociously long moustache, was following up the rear attack with a shower of abuse, from which he gathered that the Duke had been ready for the next appointment for ten whole minutes, and that if he thought he could waste a marshal's time, etc., etc.

As he conducted the reverent Gervais along the corridor, he said importantly: "You will please be as quick as you can, sir. A marshal's time is very precious."

"Oh, yes," said Gervais; he quite understood. He would be as quick as he possibly could.

Once inside, the conversation was rapid, to the point, and technical to a degree. Particulars were taken down of the deserter's appearance, inquiries were to be sent out to all the known billets, a special adjutant would journey further down the line

to warn the oncoming regiments to keep their eyes skinned. To listen to it all, one might think that the whole thing was as easy as tickling trout. Gervais thought: "If anyone could run the show, this man could!" and then mentally begged pardon to the little grey figure on the little white horse. Wine was brought, and a pleasing excitement thrilled through him, as if spa water ran in his veins. After all, this hunt-the-slipper business had its compensations. The Marshal was charming, told him all about his own family, asked after his, criticised the Emperor, drank his health immediately afterwards, questioned him about his regiment, rations, pay, and rate of promotion, slapped him on the back, and hoped to see him again some day. Gervais left the room in a kind of daze, started going downstairs, and remembered he had left his hat in the waiting-room. Something else as well as the hat. What was it?

When he turned the handle of the door, he remembered. She was sitting waiting. Of course, he'd promised to find this little goose a regiment to poison with her cheap wines. It might amuse the mess-room, having her to play around with, and they needn't drink the stuff, for all she was so damned serious about professions, and livings to earn. . . . If only she'd take off that awful dirty jacket. He laid his hands on her shoulders to do it. With quick intuition she put her hands on his, placed them by his side again, fetched his

tall hat, slipping the strap beneath his chin, and opened the door.

"Wheresyablood'mule you talk sermuchabout?"

"What?"

"Wheresyablood'mule you talk sermuchabout?"

"Oh, I left him in the field to the left of the entrance to the town. If you wait here, I'll get him." She was off like a streak of lightning in spite of her sabots. He sat heavily on the bottom step of the stairs, much to the inconvenience of busy orderlies, who begged pardon in a reproving way as they stepped over him.

Twenty minutes later, he on his mare and Julie on her mule were ambling forwards to rejoin his regiment. The road, for the time being, was deserted except for farmers who, returning from their fields, bid them good night. Between the white blossom of the trees, stars began to shine. They rode on silently.

10

The Niemen is a river, born in the Kurisches Haff, in the Baltic Sea. It has three nationalities, starting as Prussian, continuing as Polish and finishing as Russian, for which country it acts as a natural frontier for a hundred miles or so. On its marches the Grand Army had already encountered several rivers in Poland. They found they could manage the water all right, but were in difficulties about the land. Why had no one told

them about the land? Even in the hot, dry weather they were having, Poland was nothing but a vast sponge. It needed little imagination to think what it would be like in nasty weather. So they didn't think, just as people who have arranged a picnic for next day make no provisions for the bad weather which may be there.

The men in the greatest difficulties were those in charge of the heavy vehicles, drawn by oxen, carrying several thousand pounds of flour, and rice, and pulse. These vehicles were now standing up to their axles in marshy, muddy fields, as incapable of moving as a mountain. When an ox shifted a foot, there was a loud, sucking, squelching noise, and the nearest men's faces were spattered with mud. These men were sitting in the only dry places, on the wagons themselves. As the foot regiments plunged by, occasionally an officer would stop, shade his eyes with his hands and shout: "What are you men doing up there? Can't you see you are making extra weight?" and follow up with gratuitous advice about ways and means of levering the wagons up, never, however, stopping long enough actually to give a demonstration. As they said, they had their own troubles to attend to, and so they would go plunging on, their orderlies leading their terrified horses (with rolling eyes and snorting nostrils) behind, and the foot regiments would disappear behind a higher marsh than usual. Then the wagon-men sat down

to their lotto again, a game they had played so long, and knew so well, that they had invented new names for all the cards. With coats discarded they sat on the bags of flour, making their calls and their bets.

Miles and miles of bare, treacherous plain separated them from their fellows. . . . The oxen below them, with slowly-moving jaws, flicked the flies from their sides with dirt-spattered tails, and occasionally shifted a foot. . . . Squelch!

"The Beginning of the World!"

"The Cobbler's Awl!"

"The Gallows!"

"The Jew's Ear. Who has the Jew's Ear?"

"The Commissary's Hat!"

Squelch. . . .

When they had first stuck, they had sent back for instructions. What more could they do? This was the third day and no reply, or help, had come yet. They began feeding the oxen on the hay which was really for officers' horses. For themselves they made elaborate cakes of flour and rice, chuckling as they ate them: "Somebody's going short!" And the foot soldiers passed, down below them. In the clear, starry nights, they had cramp through lying in such constricted positions, and began a slow, whining grumble, *à propos* of nothing in particular. Sometimes they wondered if they'd ever see any war at all, or if everybody had forgotten them, or a wakeful

spirit would dig his neighbour in the ribs, to expound some new theory for raising heavy weights.

"Don't you see, Jean? A kind of wheel with ridges in it, to give a grip."

"And make the wagon a thousand times heavier. *Very* bright of you!"

"Ah—but I mean, one could evolve something —something on the principle of a windlass. If I had a piece of paper and a pencil, I could show you."

"Take your damn foot off my face, you lousy son of a—!"

Silence again, and perhaps, murmuring in his sleep, the Apostle of Progress would say again: "Something—on the principle—of a windlass. . . ."

The officers, once out of Poland, mounted their horses again, and held long discussions as they trotted together towards Danzig. They were puzzled about their reception in the country they had just left.

One said: "Why, from the deserted state of the villages we passed through, you'd think we were cruel invaders, rather than liberators!"

"I expect the Russians are responsible for that —telling 'em a lot of lies. After all, they're pretty dependent on Russia."

"All the same, you'd think they'd be glad to be liberated."

"I think they are, on the whole. . . . They

say the Emperor had a grand time when he stayed at Posen. . . . It's these peasants who don't understand. D'you realise we've seen nothing but Jews all the way through the country?"

"Trust *them* to stay, if they think there's money in it!"

"No women . . . no nothing. I believe the Jews strangle the girls at birth to prevent any Gentile getting hold of 'em."

"Who said so?"

"I dunno . . ." carelessly. "I just heard it."

"Anyhow, I'll be glad to see a respectable garrison town again instead of these two-room shacks. Call it a village!" and so forth.

The men in charge of the bridge equipages were having a grand time. Every river that they came to gave them a chance to do their little bit, with hundreds of admiring regiments looking on. Their outfit was particularly modern, and lots of the contraptions had never been used in a war before. There was one, a huge wagon about twenty feet long, which held shallow boats which were to be linked together on the water. That was quite ancient—done in the times of Hannibal, but not done quite so well. Every time the boats were hauled out and linked together, it was accomplished in a shorter time than before. The other wagons carried things like steel girders, and nails, and hammers, and engineers' instruments and measures. Bridges in embryo. These took

much longer to get together, but they were prouder of them when done. They had had a struggle bringing the things through Poland, but by dint of holding up two foot regiments by force, and making them do the work of draught horses, they had just pulled through.

So the armies advanced, not quite so regularly as in Saxony, but who could help that when the roads were in such bad condition? One of the first things after the liberation of Poland was obviously to compel the Poles to repair their roads. When the soldiers approached Danzig they drew into closer formation again, and brightened up their accoutrements, and the camp-followers dropped behind once more. After Danzig, Königsberg, and after Königsberg, some more of that blasted Poland, and then—Russia! . . . The river Niemen, border to the land of barbaric wealth, where they should feast at their enemies' expense, as they had done in Madrid and Vienna and Berlin! Always hoping, of course, that that nincompoop Alexander the Second wasn't going to sue for peace before the fun started. . . . As they marched, they recalled their former victories, and dreamed of the victory ahead.

II

The dragoon had kept his word, and Julie had been duly appointed vivandière to a regiment of her own. She found these soldiers much better

fun than the clumsy Foot Artillery had been, but then they were the Emperor's own, and one would expect them to be better. During the day she travelled among the baggage and gun-wagons, but always keeping a respectful distance between herself and the officers' carriages, those tall, springy, elegant things, which bowled along so silently on such enormous wheels. Even from a distance, though, she could use her sharp eyes trying to discern the faces of the gentlemen within —Davout, or Berthier, or Ney, but seldom with any success. At nights she contrived a little canteen from the back-hinge of a wagon, and spread her wares on it. She even made out a bold notice in painstaking capitals:

ICI ON VENDS
VINS ET LIQUEURS

to attract extra customers, and hung it from the ledge, lit by the sputtering flame of a candle stuck in the customary bottle.

In spite of her now comparatively affluent position, she was not happy. Everything was too good to last; the men came, and even paid for their drinks on the nail. Nobody had asked for credit yet, or attempted to beat down her prices with chaffing or abuse. As she lay under the wagon at night, she felt that a load would be lifted off her when the war really began. She had not seen Gervais again since the day he had re-

turned to his regiment, bringing her with him. Somehow, his amusing plan of flaunting her in the face of his comrades hadn't seemed quite so funny as they approached the town. It savoured too much of opera burlesque. Besides, he had considered as he jogged along, once give her encouragement, and the devil knew what it might lead to. A mistress was another matter, and he knew that it was quite the thing to discover them as one went along on a campaign, collecting them like birds' eggs, only taking care to get plenty of variety. Somewhere he dimly remembered having heard a story of a veteran, discovered crying on a field of battle. He had lost the miniatures of his mistresses, "collected," as he informed the others mournfully, "from all over the world!" Yes, there was some method in doing it like that, but a vivandière, a common or garden camp-follower, most likely full of all sorts of diseases—no, thanks! . . . Of course, she *was* pretty. He'd noticed that, even if he was fuddled, as they rode along, for, quite suddenly, as careful as any marquise to avoid night dews, she had produced a soft cloth from nowhere and wound it about her head, leaving the ends to fall over her shoulders. In the soft duskiness of the night the folds of the cloth ennobled her. Sitting her mule so straightly, as it picked its steps daintily along the road, she might have been coming from Bethlehem, instead of a garrison town. He had blinked as he looked;

one minute a vivandière, the next a madonna! Reining in his horse a little closer, reverently he had bent downwards, touching the smooth head —and she had looked up, with tender, oval face. . . .

The next minute the town lights had appeared, far away in the distance—and in the morning a bluff sergeant had taken her to the Commanding Officer, and she had had a regiment assigned to her in the briefest possible way. The C.O. hadn't liked it. She knew that. She'd overheard him saying to another officer as he left the building something about: "This woman business . . . highly unnecessary. . . . That young St. Siriac . . . trying to stamp it out."

She remembered all that, to-night. It was the night before they reached Königsberg, and she had arranged her little shop as usual with scrupulous care. After feeding and watering the mule she sat down on an upturned saddle, her sleeves rolled up to the elbow, peeling potatoes for the men's supper, in return for which she received a meal herself. The sun sank very slowly, casting a rosy glow over the officers' tents, the stacked rifles, the picketed horses and the canvas covers of the wagons. Even the faces of the soldiers, who were passing and repassing before her so silently on the turfy grass, were tinged with the same glow. The warm, earthy smell of the potatoes, and the obliging way in which the peel

fell away between her fingers, seemed to fill her with restful, quiet thoughts, thoughts to do with the present and the future, but never with the past. In her practical way, she had thrust her unhappy childhood associations out of her mind, just as she had thrust them out of her life. They were over, ended, but *this* had just begun. There were so many things to think of, and only one thing which it would *not* be sensible to think of.

But love is not practical: it is perverse, and interfering. In the very face of one's declaration, "Such and such a thing is not possible," love says, "Everything is possible"; so that love, in the same way, filled Julie with foolish, distracting thoughts. She wanted to see Gervais again. Every night as she went to sleep she thought, "To-morrow I shall see Gervais," and every morning as she woke up, "To-day is the day!" It was more exciting than a name-day, because it might happen *any* day. She began whispering his name like a charm, as she sat peeling the potatoes: "Gervais, Gervais . . . Gervais," and in the rather austere, clipped accents—her mother had come from Brittany, and had, in some strange way, bequeathed to her daughter the very characteristics she had so long lost herself—the name sounded like a prayer, and took its place among the holy syllables of the church: Ger-vais, Prie-Dieu, Mère d'Dieu, St. Pierre. She was so *very* thankful that she knew his name; she had heard it as they had

arrived in the town. Some friend of his on his way to barracks had seen them and shouted, "Hullo, Gervais!—who's the lady?" and Gervais had been furious and very short in his answers, and she had been horribly ashamed at having embarrassed him so.

That was the last she had seen of him, walking away down the street, his friend's arm about his shoulders. Now to-night she had a certain thrilled feeling inside her that she really *was* going to see him at last. Not at her canteen, for few officers stopped there. Perhaps because they didn't wish to make things awkward for the men. But sometimes, at a slack time, one would stop, soothed perhaps to listen to the soft, clipped tones, and to watch the deft fingers dealing so adequately with the provisions. But she knew, somehow, that Gervais would never visit her canteen. . . . As the sun sank, it seemed to suck the colours from the uniforms of the soldiers, draining them of their harsh tones, until at last all were silhouetted black against the luminous grey of the sky. Then customers came, and chaffings, and rest after the day's march. She leaned on her elbows on her counter, listening to the good-humoured quarrels of the soldiers, re-filling glasses, counting change, wiping out the wooden *bidons* with the corner of the apron that she wore, and still the feeling persisted in her: "I shall see him to-night!"

Towards midnight, when the last soldier had

gone, and the sentry who had just been relieved was helping her pack her goods away, and getting the finishings of the bottles as a reward, she saw a figure striding away over the field to the dip where the stream ran. (They camped near water for convenience' sake.) The figure walked so quickly he was lost in the dark in a minute, but not before she had recognised the trappings peculiar to Gervais' regiment. As quick as thought she had slipped out of her heavy shoes and, leaving the astonished sentry, was running barefooted in the direction the figure had taken, soundlessly across the grass. Everything was very still and dark. A group of horses raised their heads as she ran, and one whinnied. Standing still to gather her whereabouts, she heard her heart beating thump, thump, thump, like horses' hoofs, and wondered for a wild minute if she were being chased. Then she heard the secretive, splashy sounds of the stream ahead, and went on carefully down the slope, thinking nothing but "It has come true. I *have* seen him to-night!" . . .

There before her was somebody washing his face and hands in the stream. She came closer, her heavy skirt blown backwards by the soft night wind, then waited. As softly, as gently as the water itself, her voice said: "My lieutenant . . ." It was the customary form of address for civilians to use, but it sounded unspeakably endearing as she said it. The figure, still kneeling, turned.

It was Paul.

Foolish Julie! Inconsistent Julie—who wasn't going to have "any more truck with soldiers" only a month before! Are you changed so suddenly? —or is it the stripes of a lieutenant that have dazzled your eyes? For certainly you stand there as though you were blinded.

There is a blindness in a lover that sometimes leads to disaster. . . . Julie saw before her the features of Gervais—the broad, honest brow, the well-cut nose, the eyes not quite so quiet now, but shining strangely. Paul saw before him a wraith—a girl—a barefoot dancer from the hills of Greece, the hair blown back like a scarf, the face lifted to his, and drew her to him, gently kissing her mouth, her eyes, her hair. . . . They held each to each, two shadows on a moving world, melted into one. Her head resting on his shoulder, he heard her whisper "Gervais!" and smiled, blessing his good luck.

> The moon shines bright; in such a night as this,
> When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
> And they did make no noise, in such a night
> Troilus methinks mounted the Troyan walls
> And sighed his soul towards the Grecian tents,
> Where Cressid lay that night . . .

But there was no sighing to be done here, for Cressid lay in Troilus' arms. Their couch was the soft bank of the river, their canopy the sky.

12

That night Gervais was struggling to decipher another of his sister's screeds.

"MY DEAR GERVAIS" (it ran),

"Thank you for telling me about the breeches, but I wish you had described them more fully to me, as I am not at all sure that you haven't made a mistake. The ones I mean are of grey nankeen, with a narrow blue stripe and reinforced seat. . . . I am asking you particularly to look again, as Maman swears she has seen the stable-boy in an identical pair, and if he didn't get them from the top of the stairs—where did he? We have told Cook about it, and asked her to advise him to put them back as soon as possible, in which case no more will be said. Maman says she'll be obliged if you'll keep a watch on Paul, as he was delicate at birth, and needs a restraining influence. Don't let him wander about in the night air, without wrapping well up. We have seen the priest again, from the School of the Sacred Heart, and he says that he identified the ringleader of that escapade I told you about, and had given him a good hiding, which we were glad to hear. It turns out that the boy's uncle is a merchant in Minsk, so that probably accounts for the evil strain in his nature. My health continues much as ever, but since I have been bled once a week

I feel a little better, although it weakens one at the time. My love to both of you, and kisses from Maman to her 'Brave Men,' and our respects to the Emperor,

"Your affectionate sister,
"BABA ST. SIRIAC."

Midway through a burning June, the Grand Army reached the Niemen, having traversed every possible sort of country on the way. The latter part of their journey lay through huge, gloomy forests, lining the banks of the river, the trees of which curtained out all light, except a perpetual twilight. Very rarely a brighter gleam struggled through a space in the thinner foliage, and danced radiantly round the scabbards, and spurs, and buckles and stirrups, almost blinding the eyes, so long accustomed to a semi-darkness. Progress was necessarily slow, for single file was the only way of advance, and twigs and lower boughs had a malicious habit of playing at witches, tweaking off helmets, twining round the buttons of gaiters, slipping through the shoulder-straps of terrified drummer-boys, and detaining them at the expense of all the men behind. No birds sang in these forests, no squirrels leapt from bough to bough. The trees themselves were so huge they seemed to disdain the petty men below them, playing at hide-and-seek with an imaginary army on the other side, for forests grew there too, and at night

the braver spirits on the Polish side slid cautiously down to the river-edge, and came back with strange tales of having seen seven Cossacks spying from the tops of the pine trees, over the water.

The provision-wagons, gun-wagons, and bridge-equipages were forced to make a longer detour, by the road at the top of the forests. The cantiniers went that way too, and Julie, although she could have gone through the forests with the soldiers, preferred the upper path. After all, she was pretty sure to find *some* soldiers at night whose own provisions had gone astray and who would pay well for hers. Her one fear was lest she should meet her mother's wagon.

As she travelled, she examined the other cantiniers and vivandiers. They were most of them old, and well provided with children. When they saw Julie they received her graciously at first, for they thought she was a *fille-de-joie,* and would be able to introduce fresh customers to them, but having spied her mule, and the business-like hampers strapped upon it, their affability vanished, and instead she was met with oaths and jeers, which, however, she received with the utmost stolidity, always waiting till the night, when she could sell her wares again.

So the soldiers marched through the forests, and the camp-followers and wagons went by road, until they passed the forest of Pilwisky, and the head of the army camped on the sands of the

river. The night was uneasy. Gusty winds from variable quarters blew the cocks' feathers of the Italians' hats awry, and made the generals clutch their heavy cloaks about them.

Terrible things began to happen that night. It was as if the Niemen, a natural barrier, a natural frontier, knew the intentions and purposes of the men camped before her. As if, on the tides of her waters, flowed in a warning from all the waters of the world: from the Baltic, on whose surface the plundering Danes had gone; from La Manche, where French and English (as wayward, as shifting, as recurrent in revenge as the tides of the Channel themselves) had strewn the sea with splinters and drowned bodies and hulks of abandoned ships, from the time that they had first learned to fashion ships; from the deceitful calm of the Adriatic, on whose lovely horizon Ottoman pirates and Venetian traders had broken each other's oars and sides; from the Mediterranean, at whose bottom lay lost Armadas, forgotten Roman triremes, Syrian row boats, long, long eaten away—that tideless and insatiate sea, which seems to say: "All that I have had hitherto is nothing. Give me *more* ships to swallow!" but whose surface was newly scarred with the triumphal, ruinous wake of Nelson's fleet. . . . Perhaps all these sent a warning through the Niemen's banks, thrilling her sluggish depths with news of war—bidding her, too, that Prus-

sian-Polish-Russian river, become wholly Russian here, and take up arms against the invader, the Tyrant of Europe. Perhaps as the Romans besought the Tiber, the Russians besought the Niemen. And she answered.

As the Emperor's horse approached the bank again, after a reconnoitre, it slipped, and almost fell, throwing its rider heavily. Somebody standing by said: "This is a bad omen. A Roman would return!" Somebody too wise in his generation!

Before the actual crossing took place, the gusty winds had died to a breathless calm. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Then the rain set in, heavy, steady rain, which drenched one through in five minutes, and set horses' coats steaming in the already steamy, gaseous atmosphere. When the order to advance was given, the carriages had again sunk up to their axles, and could not be moved. The effort to move them broke the horses' legs and strained their hearts. Others were drowned where they stood, by the engulfing tide of the river. Others just died for no particular reason at all—a favourite happening in war-time, and very disconcerting. A harassed feeling spread through the men. This state of things shouldn't have begun until the offensive had opened. It was unbusiness-like. . . . What were they to do with the dead horses? And with the wagons and the guns? Would somebody go

and ask the authorities? . . . Nobody liked to go and ask the authorities, who were overworked giving orders and arranging crossings as it was. So the wagon-drivers shrugged their shoulders, looted what they could from the wagons, and went on.

13

Once across the river the advance guard, moving in battle formation, with the Emperor riding in their midst, walked warily, bayonets fixed, their eyes moving stealthily from side to side, almost in clockwork time with their step. The horses, unaccustomed to so slow a pace, became restive and champed at their bits, snorting and tossing their heads and causing no little consternation to their riders. Perhaps they missed their companions, left dead the other side of the river, or perhaps they were just apprehensive in the presence of blood, as animals are apt to be. Nothing happened for some time. Before they had crossed a gun had been fired, just to warn the enemy, but no answering challenge had replied. There was nothing before them now but the gentle rising of the bank, which presently led them to a road, or rather a cutting through the wood, so tall were the trees on either side.

It was then that the horses—and some of the men—became nervous. Soldiers under cover have an obvious advantage over soldiers in the open—but still there was nothing, not even the

gleam of a bayonet or a buckle shining through the trees. . . . They were just beginning to reassure themselves as to their enemies' cowardice, when a crackle of musketry was heard from behind them and five men dropped. Declaration of War! As quick as thought and their officers' commands, the last company had turned, and, kneeling, was firing in irreproachable style at their enemies' backs, now well out of range, galloping away on their absurdly undersized Cossack ponies, behind the very bank which had led them to the road. Some indecision followed this manœuvre; should they give chase and exact reparation? Or wait to wreak a revenge on the Russian armies proper? They decided not to waste time over these stray highwaymen, much as they deplored such ungentlemanly tactics. It was always after attacks like this that much talk about "guerilla warfare" was heard. In the heat of their expostulations they often forgot that, as far as numbers were concerned, they were infinitely superior. As they went on now, they began the guerilla complaint, that complaint that afterwards dated the Grand Army as completely as any numerals. "It isn't fair!" . . . "It isn't war!" . . . "It isn't gentlemanly!" and so on, gripping their muskets a little more firmly, into the distance.

A soldier had been left behind to guard the wounded until the next regiment appeared. Two of the five who were hit were dead, one likely to

die, and two in need of amputation. They were lying spread-eagled across the road, and a thin trail of blood, like a crimson cord, linked one to the other. The wounded were moving their heads from side to side on the dusty road, and pulling feebly at the buttons of their coats. The dead were very still, stiller than the leaves of the dark fir trees above them, stiller than anything else in the world. And the one who was likely to die? Well, the guard was attending to him. Half of his poor blackened face had been shot away, and he was complaining of severe pain in an ear that he no longer possessed.

Nearly all the first army corps were across now. The others were following as best they could. Unfortunately nobody had been left to direct them, and often they were delayed for hours wondering where the bridges were, or getting abominably damp trying to ford rivers twelve feet deep. Julie had been more fortunate, and had kept among the eatables till she reached the Russian side, and was now advancing with them. She sat side-saddle on her mule with the hampers containing her stock to the right of the saddle to balance it. The mule, whom she had christened Rousseau, was behaving very badly. He was a great, gaunt creature, and had been grass-fed until Julie bought him, so that even then, when urged to travel faster than he liked, a certain harmless gall on his side used to turn scarlet, as if in pro-

test. He had also a nervous habit of shivering, and would occasionally stop on the way, to shiver the more comfortably. Julie hit him at these times with a huge stick, crying gutturally: "Arré, Rousseau!" The soldiers soon learnt that cry and used to greet her with "Arré, Rousseau, Arré, vivandière!" and perhaps give the animal's hind-quarters a good-humoured shove, which nearly sent the vivandière over his head. Oh, they had good times! Her only anxiety was the precious regiment, and were they not ahead? And so, would she not, in the course of events, catch them up again? She thought about Gervais too, as she sat perched up there, and sometimes closed her eyes, trying to imagine that he was riding by her side, and that they were still on their way to his regiment, when the stars had blinked through the blossoming trees. Or the night on the bank, when the stars had been higher, more remote, and she and Gervais alone had existed, in a spinning world. By resolutely shutting her eyes she could return to that remoteness, and the creaking of the carriage-wheels, the shouts of the drivers, the sharp rattle of canvas bellying in the wind, receded like a tide, leaving only faint echoings on a far shore. Even the irregular motion of the mule under her, and the jerking of the reins in her inert hands, was nothing more important than the motion of the clouds in the sky above.

Occasionally a messenger, all heat and hurry,

would gallop through the wagon-cavalcade, making the place white with dust, on his way to the authorities ahead, but usually their progress was peaceful enough. They met no Cossacks during the day, and at nights slept in a quadrangle of wagons, with a sentry at each corner. This was all just as it should be. They had no doubt that the battalions were in the thick of a battle, but that the enemy respected their own position as non-combatants should be respected. They were carrying out orders, and would rejoin the soldiers at the first village. . . . It was there that Julie first got news about her own regiment and hurried on to meet them, for they had advanced to the next village. She travelled so far with another company.

They were sitting about the principal road as she came up, looking distinctly puzzled, for they had met with the strangest reception they had yet experienced. They hailed her as a long-lost friend.

"Hullo, vivandière, here we are again!"

"Thought you'd lost us for ever, didn't you, vivandière?"

"Welcome to the fairy palace, M'selle! Welcome to the grotto of enchantment!"

"Hurry up with those drinks! I've made so many speeches in reply to the welcome the mayor gave us, I'm all parched inside!"

Roars of laughter greeted this witticism. Ig-

norantly, Julie asked: "Where are the towns-people?" but this only produced fresh bursts of mirth, so that she was forced to answer it herself. Knitting her brows, she said: "They've not left, have they?"

"Right first time, vivandière! Go up to the top of the class!"

"What—all of them?"

"Every man-Jack, and every Jill too!"

"And left their houses and their goods?"

"Everything! It's a great joke, isn't it?" and they laughed afresh, although underneath they all of them knew it wasn't a joke at all. It was too uncanny for that. To them, property was a sacred thing. They would have died defending it, and if they couldn't defend it, why, they would stay behind, and keep a pretty close watch on things. But this complete renunciation! No—it wasn't the way of war. They laughed, but they weren't really amused.

"Meet any Russians on the way, vivandière?"

"No . . . did you?"

"No, darling; not yet. I'll bring you their skulls to grow ferns in, when I do."

"How much are you charging for the Burgundy to-day?"

"The same as usual. Two-fifty a bottle."

"Why, you little miser—you didn't pay that for the mule!"

Seriously, intently, she was filling the *bidons,*

and making rapid calculations, in spite of the circle of joking men about her. She very seldom smiled; she hadn't much occasion for it, but she knew instinctively that it added to her clientele if she was happy and easy-going, instead of foul-mouthed and parsimonious and ugly, like the others. So she really made an effort, sometimes, and achieved the most radiant smile in the world. It came so suddenly, and melted so mysteriously, that it was like a rainbow, and struck people dumb for the time that it lasted. She smiled like that now, at the man who had spoken last, and the poor clumsy fool dropped the wooden cup as she held it out to him, his mouth agape. She was still smiling, when the most agonising shrieks were heard from behind a barn, and Josef, the wit of the regiment, reappeared, half-carrying, half-dragging a huge pig clad in imposing robes of red, with spectacles upon its wrinkled snout. He shouted as he struggled with it: "His worship the mayor!" and again the helpless laughter broke out, until Josef himself was so overcome by his own joke that he released the mayor, who ran squealing and scuttling on all fours, away into the wood.

"That's a good one, Josef! Where did you find the clothes?"

"In here," he pointed behind him. "There's lots more. I think it's where they keep the church robes."

"Church nothing! These Cossacks are not religious. They worship Baal. They've got a statue of him on the walls of Moscow. They sacrifice to him with new-born children—he drinks their blood!"

"Not really?"

"It's a fact."

"That's too bad, isn't it?"

They had forgotten the pig now, and forgotten their drinks. All their interest was centred on the man who knew so much about Moscow. Unobtrusively collecting the glasses, Julie packed them again, and led her mule on. So *like* men, not to answer one's questions properly. She supposed the inhabitants *had* deserted the village, and wondered why. How could they leave their homes, their possessions? She stood, staring down the street. There was only one in the village. The shacks themselves hardly differed from the ones in Poland, being entirely made of log-wood, with low roofs and tiny windows. Where had the inhabitants fled to? How was it they had left no trace? She shook her head as she stared. Already she saw the inevitable flames that would engulf them. Everything would be burnt. It was so regular a proceeding; it was almost official. And yet looting wasn't official yet —that was such a waste. She shrugged her shoulders, the whole thing was too complicated

—and continued on her way, seeking for a shelter for the night.

Further on ahead, the soldiers had met with the same luck. Everything was as still as Death. Almost angrily, they set about being as destructive as they could, camping deliberately in the green young corn, trampling down the other crops, killing the livestock. . . . And to-morrow they'd burn the place to the ground . . . just as a lesson.

As the trumpeters sounded "Turn in," all along the line a sigh seemed to stir the crushed corn as it lay, and a small drummer-boy with beating heart woke his companion to whisper: "The woods are full of ghosts!"

14

"VITEBSK,

"*29th July.*

"The Emperor, in company with the Viceroy of Italy, and Marshals Wilson and Davout, will review the Guard to-morrow morning at 9.

"He will follow this up with a general survey of troops in the square, punctually at 11.30. Commanding officers are asked to report to Headquarters and to ensure that their men are provided with necessities for cleaning accoutrements and repairing clothing, by THIS AFTERNOON.

"The C.O.'s of incoming troops will report to headquarters IMMEDIATELY.

"Cantiniers, Vivandiers, Sutlers, Masters of Provisions, and all other NON-COMBATANTS will camp OUTSIDE the town. Bartering of wines, spirits, and other goods, is NOT permitted in the streets. Any person found disobeying this order will be fined heavily. Any subsequent offence is punishable by death.

"Civilians are asked to keep off the streets as much as possible during PARADE HOURS, and are forbidden to impede any soldier, IN ANY WAY, in performing his duty. ALL JUSTIFIABLE complaints will be dealt with in the TOWN HALL, every morning between 11 and 1 o'clock.

"YOUNG WOMEN are advised NOT to make journeys, even from one street to another, unless provided with an escort. THIS IS THE LAST TIME THIS WARNING WILL BE ISSUED, and Headquarters will not hold themselves responsible for any accident due to its neglect.

"All shopkeepers, merchants, farmers and gentlemen of position and leisure, who have left this town under the misapprehension that a hostile army was encamping in it, are advised to return at their earliest convenience. The soldiers of the Grand Army of France do NOT behave like hooligans and Cossacks. Any damage or hurt which occurs to the shops, farms or houses of the above-mentioned, can NOT be recognised officially, while the ABSENCE of their owners INVITES ACCIDENTS.

"THIS IS THE LAST TIME THIS WARNING WILL BE ISSUED.

"SPECIAL NOTICE. The C.O.'s of every regiment must ensure that their under-officers WEAR GLOVES at parade to-morrow."

"See that, St. Siriac? What have you been doing with your gloves, you naughty boy? . . . I say, though, hasn't the little fellow got eyes like a needle! Here we are, half-way to Moscow, and he can still fidget about a little matter like gloves! . . . You see the sting in it, don't you? Oh—he's damned clever! He doesn't put up the thing to *us,* but to our superior officers, just to show his opinion of our brains!"

"I suppose it's attention to detail, like that, which has made us the finest army in the world," Gervais said slowly. He was feeling depressed, and had come to the notice-board hoping to see some intimation of their departure. All these parades, and inspections and things, rasped on his nerves. Before his particular army corps had reached Vitebsk, they had encountered the enemy, and had had a battle then and there. And thinking of it gave him bad dreams at night. It had been so very different from what he had imagined, and it was his first battle. There had been no time for elaborate plans like the ones they had on paper, or at manœuvres. There were they, and there were the enemy, round the bend in the road,

with the shelter of a wood between. Blood and groanings and weepings and smoke and wounded men! And riderless horses, trotting distractedly from one gun to another, and the terrible stillness of the dead afterwards, all with their eyes open and staring. During the actual battle he had found himself wondering what Paul thought of it all, and hoping he was safe. He felt responsible for his brother. He thought: "Well—we're in for it now, and we've got to go through with it, so let's get on with it as quickly as possible!" So every day he came to the notice-board, hoping to see the news of their evacuation of the town, and every day he was disappointed. It was bad enough staying all that time at Vilna, but if they were to go through the same thing here! . . .

He dragged Brigette away, and sat down with him in a café off the main road, which was frequented by officers, and they ordered drinks. The place was full of men from every conceivable country and regiment. Glasses were spilt, the liquor dripping unnoticed on to the floor. Tables were tilted at dangerous angles, and overworked waiters performed miracles of dexterity with trays. Indescribable confusion and noise filled the place. At the far end of the room, someone was playing the latest thing from the operettas in Paris, and every time the chorus came, the windows shook in their sockets with the voices. Brigette lifted his glass. "To Moscow!" he said,

and grimaced. Gervais repeated mechanically: "To Moscow!" drained his glass and called for more drinks.

And in immediate defiance of the order, a vivandière *was* in the town. To avoid detection, Julie had discarded her coat, and shoulder-strap, and wore only a white shirt above the grey skirt. She had tied a handkerchief round her head, the only gay piece of colour about her, and was traversing the streets in her search for Gervais. It was two months since that night on the bank; two months too long, and she was determined to find him, if only to look at him from a distance, and to reassure herself that he hadn't been killed. She, too, had seen engagements before reaching Vitebsk, and they meant no more to her than all the other battles she had seen. The same procedure took place; the camp-followers had retreated to a safe distance, protected themselves with their wagons, and afterwards helped with the dead and wounded. Quite a profitable occupation, because, although the wounded were not in a position to pay for the brandy they had, one recovered it afterwards from Headquarters, and as for the dead—well, they had no further use for anything at all, and one took full advantage of the fact. . . . Now they were in Vitebsk, nearer Moscow than ever, and Gervais must be found.

As she was advancing from the top of the street, several tipsy cavalry officers turned the

corner, supporting each other nobly from one side of the street to the other. She would have turned and gone back, but they might have given chase and been arrested, and then inquiries would be made. No, she must go on. As they approached each other, one of the party noticed her heavy shoes, and began the song:

"Rencontrai trois Capitaines
Avec mes sabots! (Loud laughter)
Rencontrai trois Capitaines,
Avec mes sabots!
Ils m'ont appellé vilaine
Avec mes sabots, dondaine,
Oh—oh ooh—av-ec mes sab-o-ots!"

As she reached them they stretched out across the road, still singing, and prevented her passing, whereupon she ducked suddenly and would have gone running under their arms, but they closed about her, and taking hands again, went on with their silly song as they galloped round.

"Ils m'ont appellé vilaine,
Avec mes sabots!
Ils m'ont appellé vilaine,
Avec mes sabots.
Je ne SUIS (with a screech) *pas si vilaine,*
Avec mes sabots dondaine.
Oh oh-o-o-oh! Avec mes sabots!"

Here their memories and their breath both gave out, and they stood, swaying and laughing, deciding what to do next. Julie struggled hard

with a desire to lay two of them flat with a kick in the stomach, and then trust to her heels. They'd soon know she was used to army ways then, and might give her away. She must just wait, and try to look frightened and coy, and all the things she didn't feel in the least. At last one of them spoke.

"What shall we do with *this* pretty thing?" he said.

"Duck her in the river," said one, and was immediately squashed for such an ungentlemanly suggestion.

"Take her to the barracks," said another . . . but no . . . that had too many risks attached to it. Then someone said:

"What about taking her to Lasky's?" and was greeted with cheers.

To Lasky's, then, they went, taking a struggling, angry Julie with them, and having got her there, they stood her on a table and thrust glasses into her hands, making her drink the health of the army and the Emperor, and anything else that came into their heads. Even while she was forced to gulp down the heady wine, she found herself thinking: "This stuff is pretty poor."

"Dance, my pretty one!"

"Give us a polonaise!"

"I'll give you a kiss if you dance for me!"

"I'll give you something better than that!"

"Dance, dance, dance!" and to show her what

they meant, they took partners among themselves, and went skipping and hopping among the prostrate tables and chairs. . . . For the first time she smiled. So they took her for a Russian or a Pole! Well—let them think so. She answered them in the most hideous, halting French:

"I can't dance—no music."

Immediately someone was at the piano, and in reply to the repeated yells of the men at the table beneath her, she began a sort of clumsy, unsteady jig, keeping time with her sabots on the table to the very accented time of the music . . . clop, clop, clop . . .

Gervais raised his fuddled head from the table. Where had he heard that sound before . . . ? Somebody running . . . somebody running to get something, and telling him to wait. The brief dance had ended when he remembered who it was, and turning quickly, he saw Julie struggling on the table-top, freeing her skirt from the soldiers' hands, stamping on them when they rested on the table, flinging glasses and bottles at their faces, and answering them at last in a most vivid flow of French, her eyes blazing like two torches. Gervais thought: "Surely this isn't the child I saw asleep in the waiting-room that day?" and dodged to avoid a shower of glass. At that moment, somebody upset the table, seizing Julie as she fell, and kissing her, saying: "Why—you little swindler —you're French after all!" Gervais rose un-

steadily . . . things were going too far . . . he didn't want the girl raped before his eyes. Besides, those blasted 2nd Corps men—always taking liberties—always shoving in where they're not wanted—. He shouted: "Put the girl down!" and strode across the room to the circle of men. . . . Nobody heard. He suddenly lurched out with his fists on the hard heads of the nearest men, who fell all too easily, and came into the centre of the group. Julie had given up struggling and was lying quite still, with her eyes screwed up, so that he felt again the tremendous wonder and pity of the first time. . . . The poor shirt was torn to ribbons, and he saw the delicate shoulder-blades, and the satiny roundness of the shoulder as she lay. Her head had fallen back over the man's arm, and the hair hung down. He took it in his hand. It was very soft. Somehow he couldn't shout and bluster when she was lying so still.

"Give her to me," he said.

Rather scared, the other man handed her over. A joke was one thing, and a row another. Gervais went back to the table, and sat down, still with her in his arms. She opened her eyes, and recognising him, smiled brilliantly, content to lie there, having found him. The other men had picked themselves up, and were round the piano again—deep in the same song. They bore no malice about being knocked down—as long as a

Frenchman had done it. The two waiters began to set things to rights again, dusting the tables, and sweeping up the broken glass. Gervais said crossly, looking down at her:

"What d'you want to go and get mixed up in a thing like that for?"

She answered simply:

"I was looking for you. They caught me on the way. . . . I'm glad they did if I found you."

He knitted his forehead. Somehow the gratitude—he supposed it was gratitude—was overdone. He thought she had wanted to thank him for having found the regiment, but she wasn't thanking him like a vivandière, but like a lover. Forward little brute! He sat her up violently on his knee, and raised his voice above the din of the piano:

"Look here!" he said, " you mustn't come chasing after me like this. I found you a regiment—stick to it!"

In her turn she knit her brows:

"You didn't want to see me?" she said. That was queer. After the night on the bank, one would think . . . and she *did* love him. Officers were queer people, she reflected. One day they're fond of you, and the next they're not. She tried again:

"I was returning this," she said, and carefully drew off her neck a small crucifix on a ribbon. He took it in his hand, turning it over and over.

"Where did you get this?"

"You gave it to me that night."

"I—*what?*" He took his eyes from the crucifix, staring at her as if she was mad.

"That night on the bank. . . . You took it from round your neck, and gave it to me. I thought you might be needing it again." (And that was a lie too, because she never meant to return it—but when he looked at her with that official look—.)

A dreadful doubt was born in Gervais' mind. Was she trying on a sort of bluff? Going to bluff him into believing he'd had her, and given her this for it? So *that* was the way she supplemented her earnings—a kind of blackmail! He supposed that if he denied it vehemently she could pretty soon spread the reverse rumour, and who believes a soldier when a woman says just the opposite? With the utmost difficulty he restrained himself from shaking her till her teeth rattled in her head. . . . And still she sat there, with that radiant smile, holding out the crucifix in her hand. If the rest of the company hadn't been too drunk to notice such things, they would have split their sides, to see the huge scowling dragoon, and the smiling girl on his knee, both sitting like waxworks. At last Gervais found his tongue.

"Then how do you account for *this?*" he said, and savagely pulling at his coat-buttons, fumbled till he produced another crucifix, hanging on the

same kind of cord. Julie's eyes travelled from this one to the one in her hand. Here was a dilemma! The smile faded from her face.

"I suppose you were afraid I wouldn't return this, so you bought another."

"Bought nothing! I've had it ever since I could walk!"

"But this one—you gave it me."

Gervais dropped his voice to a sterner level. To look at them, both with a cross in their hands, they might have been taking a solemn vow instead of quarrelling.

"See here," he said. "I daresay you've bluffed quite a lot of people with that game, but you can't bluff me, and what's more, you won't get a sou out of me." . . . She didn't answer. Ah, he thought, that's shown her what sort of a chap I am! And he went on in a more discontented voice:

"I'm disappointed in you. Really I am. It makes me realise what a fool I was to have taken pity on you that day. I expected gratitude, to say the least of it, and I wouldn't have minded a curtsey when you saw me in the road, but—deliberately tracking me down like this, and snivelling about having lost your virginity to me—" Suddenly the featherweight on his knee changed to no weight at all, but he wasn't going to let her off till he'd finished with her, so he shot out a long

arm, and caught her by the shoulder, turning her to him.

"You see, my dear—it can't be done. I'm not such a fool as I look, you know." Still no answer—she had dropped her head. Cruelly, he put his other hand out and raised her chin, till she looked him in the eyes.

"Why so modest, all of a sudden?"

"It's true, whatever you say," she said.

That annoyed him. So like a peasant to repeat the same thing sullenly, even after one had done one's best to reason with her. He was so angry that he shouted:

"All right! Think what you damn well like! It doesn't do me any harm, and you won't get a sou out of it!" He got up so suddenly that the chair fell back and grazed his shin, but he still held her by the shoulders, and shook her to emphasise his words.

"And enough of this following me about. I'm an officer—not a sergeant-major. Go and pester *them*—that's your job. Get them to buy your filthy spirits, and then make 'em believe they've bought *you*, and pay accordingly!" He strode to the door. She made no movement to follow him, but stood there. The door clanged to, and through the steamy windows she could see him swinging down the road as if it belonged to him, towards barracks. She picked up his chair and,

sitting down slowly, twisted the string of the crucifix between her fingers thoughtfully, staring into vacancy. She hadn't meant to follow him about, and be a nuisance—she only wanted to make sure he hadn't been killed. Of *course* he was an officer, and she was a vivandière, and nobody knew better than she the gulf that divided them, in spite of the Revolution—but there was that night on the bank, or had she dreamed it? The crucifix wasn't a dream, anyway. . . . The tired waiter was sweeping away the crumbs from the table. "Bitte, Fraulein." Funny how there were always German waiters, it didn't matter *where* the Emperor had his war. Even if they'd gone to England that time, there would have been German waiters, just the same. She rested her head on her arms, watching the waiter as he folded his cloth. He was very hot, poor man, and a little rivulet of sweat was running down both sides of his face and dripping off his chin. . . . Splash. . . . But it was curious that one splash should be by the very edge of her sleeve. She came to the conclusion that she must be crying. . . . Yes, there were several splashes now. Last time she cried was when—? Wasn't it when she was eleven years old, and had caught her fingers in the hinge of the door, and Mother Gateau had been quite anxious in case she wouldn't be able to wash glasses any more? She fell to wondering where her mother was now, and whether Thérèse had

been given a proper funeral, with a priest and everything, and a crucifix to hold in her small hands. . . . A crucifix? . . . Splash.

15

That general survey of troops in the square never took place, for next morning the sleeping thousands of soldiers, in hay-lofts and tents, public buildings and private out-houses, barracks and billets, were awakened by an earlier réveille than usual. The clamour woke the cocks, and the town was full of trumpet-calls and cock-a-doodle-do's before any flush of dawn had brightened the sky's grey. An excited adjutant burst into the room where the St. Siriacs were sleeping, in company with three others.

"Hi—you chaps, we're off! His High-and-mightiness has decided that the time is ripe!"

Paul shook his tousled head. "Russians?" he said sleepily. The word woke the rest of the room. If it was Russians, it was too good to be true. It would mean a pitched battle, and then perhaps a return home.

The adjutant shrugged his shoulders: "Dunno. I only know we're on the move."

"Where for?"

"How should I know? You'll be told soon enough when you're ready."

"Moscow. I feel it in my bones," said the pessimist. Someone threw a pillow at him. Mos-

cow, the Eldorado of a month back, now represented only more hanging about (unless the Russians changed their tactics) and finished any chance of reaching home before the winter. A clatter of hoofs on cobblestones came through the window.

"You've half an hour," the adjutant said, and was gone.

Paul yawned and stretched, sitting naked on the edge of the bed, and reached for his boots. The others were all stirring, except Gervais, who was still completely hidden under the sheets. His brother leant over him, and pulled them ungently away.

"Hurry, *mon vieux,*" he said.

Gervais grumbled in his sleep. He had been dreaming that he had kidnapped Alexander the Second and was carrying him on his back like a sack of flour, up a steep hill, a hill very like the one that backed on to the St. Siriac estate. Every time he reached the top of the hill he met the Emperor, and the Emperor pushed him down again. The side of the hill was lined with people cheering and encouraging him on. His mother, his sister, his old nurse, the concierge at training quarters in Paris. . . . Then a storm had come, and they had all melted away, except the shadow of the Emperor at the top, jeering at him . . . and the weight on his shoulder had changed to a featherweight, except where something pressed

hard on his heart. He had just discovered that it was Julie he was carrying instead of Alexander the Second, and was about to throw her down, when Paul woke him. He was clutching the crucifix in his hand as he woke. He saw his brother bending over him, naked, and sleepily remembered that he had a crucifix like that too. But it wasn't there when he looked. He sat up, mechanically reaching for his clothes, while the others clanked to and fro with loose swords and scabbards and boots. Somebody was yelling for their servant through the window. Gervais caught hold of Paul as he was struggling into his top-coat.

"Where's your crucifix?" he said. Paul stared, then burst into peal after peal of laughter.

"Gervais's taking a gloomy view!" he called out. "He thinks his precious little brother's going to be killed! He thinks his little brother ought to be meditating on the future life, as he's so close to it! Never mind, darling," he continued, "I won't go without you. I won't leave you to face the music at home!" Everybody laughed, Gervais joining in, buttoning and buckling hurriedly. As he passed his brother later through the narrow doorway, he said:

"Honestly, Paul, what have you done with it?"

For the moment Paul was eclipsed under his tall hat, then, his white teeth gleaming, he said:

"Oh, I've not had it for years: I gave it to a girl, why?"

Ta rantara ta rantara, ta rantara!

16

A month later, and Russia still baked like any desert, under a pitiless sun. The ranks threw away their accoutrements, horses dropped, men died of thirst, and then of drinking too quickly when they had reached water. Dysentery and other miseries hazarded the progress of the troops, but the sign-post finger still pointed onwards. In such an atmosphere, even the smallest battles were welcomed, as hastening the day of Victory. When there were no battles (and indeed, nothing had happened yet that was really worthy of that name) they marched as men bewitched, thirsting, thirsting, for the mirage that was Moscow. Some of them began to doubt that such a place had ever existed. What—a city? In *these* plains? And always ahead, faint on the horizon, those mythical Russian armies. Cossacks they had met—Cossacks were as different from real Russians as Sans-culottes from the Royal Guard. How was it, then, that these Russians were *always* retreating? Officers and men puzzled alike. Plains gave way to trackless forests, forests to plains; and whenever there was a depression in the level, one could be pretty sure that there was a village there, silent, deserted, the

little wooden huts more like dog-kennels than human habitations. In their frustrated anger, they always burnt these villages, and laughed savagely at night, to think of the inhabitants creeping back, under cover of dark, to find their ant-hill broken open by a boot! That was the only satisfaction they had, for they certainly saw no inhabitants, except a Jew here and there, and who is interested in Jews?

And the Russians retreated. . . .

Day followed sultry day, night followed night. Troops caught each other up, passed each other, were lost in the distance. Messengers flew like fire between marshal and general. Men deserted, and were either captured and shot at dawn for their pains, or else died of thirst in the loneliness and heat. Moscow was no longer a mad craze on the part of their Emperor, it was a grim necessity. They meant to get there or die in the attempt, so they set their faces, and, looking beyond those elusive grey Russian shadows that for ever retreated before them, they strained their eyes for the Holy City—their hope that had risen, and died, and was now risen more brightly than ever. Paris became a cool dream of long ago. Green boulevards, plashing fountains, all, all faded. And as the Parisians remembered Paris, so all those men, drawn from every country in Europe, remembered their country, and were refreshed, remembering.

And the Russians retreated. . . .

Smolensk appeared on the horizon like a jewel. Here was an inhabited city! Even from far away the smoke could be seen ascending from the chimneys, into the clear air. The advance guard passed an old man with a flock of goats, and would have fallen on his neck and kissed him, but that he, quite naturally, suspected other intentions and drew a knife. He stood in the middle of the road, eyeing them under his long, biblical, white hair, and his goats stood round him, flicking their ears and chewing superciliously.

"Moscow?" they asked, pointing to the town. He didn't understand. They asked him in French, Greek, German, Italian, and then Yiddish. His brow cleared, and he smiled, bowing his head to all the interpreters.

"Smolensk," he said, and the goats seemed to laugh at them, for they all shook their heads at once, and a hundred little bells tinkled. They asked where the Russian soldiers were. He said he didn't know. He had seen them that morning early, when he left the town with his flock, but he didn't notice where they went to, except that they weren't staying in the town itself.

"I'm not a Russian myself," he said, and bowed again. "My father came from Cyprus." But they were not interested in his family history, and brushed past him, scattering the goats. It was good news, anyhow, that the Russians weren't oc-

cupying the town, because they particularly looked forward to their time there. Beds to sleep in, pretty women, good things to eat and drink. Unconsciously their step quickened.

As they drew nearer, they noticed that the biblical appearance of the old man was emphasised in the architecture of the town, and yet, again there were those confounded wooden houses, just *asking* to be burnt! True, they were more ornate than in the villages, and painted in bright reds and blues, but they were unmistakably wooden. Mingled with them, stood houses of brick and stone, with metal grilles outside the tiny windows, and flat or domed roofs, which gleamed strangely under their stippled metal paint of gold and silver. Here indeed, Orient elbowed Occident, as if they each rejoiced in the other's individuality, and deliberately chose to mingle. Like Vitebsk, the city had its foundations on the banks of a river, for the most clear of reasons—water. The crossing of the river Dnieper had been rather a feat, and as the soldiers approached it again, they were filled with the friendliest sentiments. Like sentinels, the typical dark firs, of such a shadowy green that they verged on black, walled the banks of the river as well as any fortress, but between them, strange little trees, whose roots had not gone so deep, leaned tenderly over the water, and dipped their leaves in its shining surface. Higher still, stood trees more like miniature firs

than anything else, but which after disclosed themselves as a kind of olive. Fruit trees, too, reminiscent of French orchards, sent their sweet burden of scent along the air, and rosy apples glowed like lanterns, hanging in the branches. Even gardens became visible, and women and children, brightly-clad, standing shading their eyes to stare at the troops, and cattle knee-deep in the river, and church bells calling to worship. So that a sort of symbol of comfort, and cool hands, and rest rose up from this place (as the water is drawn up into the sky by the sun) and hung about it, and tired feet and weak knees became strengthened and the laggards stopped lagging, and a new spirit of hope was born among the men.

They sped towards their Promise. . . .

And afterwards, a Russian woman sat down, not by the waters of Babylon but by the waters of the Dnieper, swollen with strange flotsam and jetsam, and bewailed her city. And the little trees wept too, and trailed their long hair in the pitiful river, and sighed in the night wind. Only the fir trees still stood, as rigid as the Russias. And the woman sang a song like this:

"There was a city here once.
A city most fair.
The sun kissed it, the waters laved it,
The grass grew like a blessing.
Now it is ashes, and my heart is ashes for my city.
There were children here once.

Children most fair,
Two were mine. . . . I fed them at my breast.
My children grew like a blessing.
Now they are ashes, and my heart is ashes for my children.
There were saints here once,
And Saint Nicholas of Russia.
We prayed to them for God's mercies.
They are ashes—they were wood—they are ashes,
And the saints did not save the children.
Now I will turn to God—I will beseech Him
To smite the Invader, to save Russia.
To drive the Invader out of the Land.
My fruit-trees are torn down, my fiery orchards are quenched,
My house is scattered in the winds,
My children, my darlings—who slept under my heart
Are ashes, under the ashes of this city . . .
Shall I weep, O Dnieper?
Shall I swell with my tears the swollen waters of your river?
See how the trees weep by your side
For the city that they guarded—for the city that is no more.
The children laughed, swinging under the shadow of the trees,
And my Little One held an apple to her mouth.
Now she is ashes, and the city ashes above her.
Weep, O Dnieper, for our city!"

And after that, she wept, too, for every word she said was true, and as she turned away from her sorrow, and from the river, she saw the fir trees, still proudly erect in spite of their charred trunks and scorched foliage, and she put her arms

round the nearest tree and laid her face to it, and sang softly, looking up to the stars.

> "But there is a God in Russia.
> He will come and save her.
> He will save the Soul that is Russia."

17

Scavenging among the still smoking ruins, were three soldiers. The hot cinders burnt their fingers as they scraped for hidden treasure, but they were hardy enough to put up with that. Besides, their intentions were good. They all had sons and daughters, or nieces and nephews, and they meant to take them something nice home. One, a grizzled veteran, was touchingly pleased when he discovered a doll with one leg, and stroked the frock proudly, and touched the round red cheeks, still sticky as a horse-chestnut bud, from the ashes.

"This will do for Margoton," he said, and sighed a sigh of pleasure. The others looked at the doll enviously. Their own luck was out, and they only had a little brass goat's bell between them.

"I'll give you a bottle of claret for that, Rouget," said one. Rouget shook his head.

"You don't understand. I promised Margoton," he answered. He was about to examine his treasure more closely, when the ground on which he was standing gave way, precipitating him suddenly into a stone-walled basement some twenty

feet below. His two friends stepped back to avoid the same fate, but were half choked with the heavy dust that rose, literally filling their mouths with ashes, and making the tears run down their dirty faces, leaving narrow tracks of white behind them. A few moments went by. They advanced cautiously, beating down the dust with their hands.

"Rouget?" they called. No answer came. They called several times, but Rouget was apparently preoccupied with his doll. They began to joke about the fun they would have with him when he crawled out, and sat down gingerly to wait, still keeping up a casual searching with their fingers in the warm ashes.

And twenty feet below them Rouget was lying with a broken neck. As the disturbed dust settled again it fell upon him, covering him like fine snow, merging him in with the rest of the ruins. He had been an old soldier; had seen a king dethroned, and a republic born, had fought in Austrian, German, and Spanish wars, had taken his share of honourable wounds, and fought with one eye gone for twenty years. Now here he lay dead. Not on the field of battle, as befitted him, but dead as clumsily as a civilian, just through not watching where he was going. Yet the dust had settled over him so completely that, an hour later, the other two searched and searched, and never found him, and came to the conclusion that he

must have crawled out through another opening that they saw there, and given them the slip. They went back to quarters. That is the way some soldiers die.

18

One evening, a fortnight later, with the town of Viasma, or what was left of it (and it had come off more lightly than Smolensk) behind, and the plains of Borodino in front, Paul St. Siriac was trying to urge his brother to taste the bliss of eavesdropping. The Emperor's tent had been pitched, as usual, in the centre of a square, and from it and to it ran harassed orderlies all day long. The guard outside grew bewildered with so many exits and entrances, and it was easy enough to loiter about the place under some pretext or other. Paul had been employing himself in this edifying fashion for some days, and was now attempting to persuade Gervais. The younger boy was seated on a saddle, his elbows resting on the knees of his gaitered legs, his face between his hands as mischievous as Puck. He knew that his own brain worked faster than Gervais' did, and loved to see the suspicious look on his brother's face when he suspected mockery. He was looking suspicious now. Paul went on:

"It's so damn easy—nobody knows. All you've got to do is to look busy, and stand about. Old Jawbones thinks the Emperor's most likely giving

you an audience later on, and doesn't like to tell you to clear off, and there's nobody else that matters."

"I'm not afraid. It's the principle of the thing I don't like," said Gervais.

"Oh, mamma's treasure!" He leant forward, plucked a long piece of dried grass, and tickled Gervais' chin. As quick as thought Gervais' arm shot out and caught Paul by the collar. They were soon rolling together in a kind of puppies' fight, playing roughly, but neither hurting the other. It was too hot a game to last long. When they were both exhausted and lying on their backs, side by side, Paul began again:

"We're making history, my dear. You don't seem to realise that. This isn't just a fidgety little campaign. It may seem much like all the other campaigns, but it's different. Trust your brother's perception for that."

"How *can* you know," said Gervais, his voice muffled because his chin was buried in his collar. "This is the first we've either of us taken part in. It only seems more important to you because you're actually on the spot." Then he muttered something else, but it was lost in the collar.

"What?" said Paul.

"I only said it'll all be the same in a hundred years' time."

"Well, then, why won't you come and listen to them spouting? Who's going to blame us? I

tell you we're taking part in history, and it's our business to find out as much about it as we can. Just think, Gervais, in a hundred years' time every schoolboy will be able to give the reasons of everything that took place in this campaign! They mayn't be the right ones, but right or wrong, they're reasons. We poor fools don't know why we're doing anything at all."

"Of course we do. Don't talk nonsense!"

"Well, then—why are we hanging about like this instead of going straight on to Moscow?"

"Because we want to fight those blasted Russians."

"Are they stopping our progress by NOT fighting?"

"N-no," reluctantly, "but it will decide the issue better if we fight. We shall know where we stand better."

"Why will it decide the issue?"

"Because we shall win. Don't ask such damn silly questions, Paul."

"They're not really silly. You must try to imagine that I'm posterity when I ask them. Here's an easy one for you: What is going to happen in the next twenty-four hours?"

"I don't know. Ask my superiors."

"D'you think they know?"

"Of *course!*" with contempt. Paul paused a minute, then sighed. Turning over on to his stomach and looking Gervais in the face, he said:

"You'd know better if you'd come and eavesdrop, my dear." There was no answer to this, so Paul continued, raising his eyes from his brother's face to the placid clouds in the sky:

"War's so different in practice from theory. You remember the questions and answers we used to learn off by heart at the college? It all seemed so easy then. 'Why did so-and-so do this?'—'Because he knew that thingumbob would do that, and that such-and-such a position was the most favourable.' See? Easy as winking. All soldiers were obedient automatons, and all commanding officers possessed of an uncanny clairvoyance, a manner like melted butter, and a habit of working together that would rival the angels in heaven. Time and tides, and regiments and platoons, and places and occasions, fell into harmonious juxtaposition, just like a kaleidoscope. Sometimes they even knew beforehand whether the battle was going to be a defeat or a victory!" He laughed, dropping his head, and shaking it in humorous remonstrance at an imaginary staff of officers. "It's all such rot, Gervais . . . it isn't like that at all!"

Gervais muttered gruffly that Paul could indulge in these sacrilegious reflections if he liked. . . . For his part he trusted the Emperor.

"You can say what you like, Paul. He's a marvellous general."

"He is, Gervais, but he isn't God Almighty."

"Nobody said he was."

"Oh, they don't say it . . . they imply it. The history books will imply it too. All except the English ones!" Another pause, and then, irrelevantly: "I daresay they think he's God Almighty, too!"

"Who think who is?"

"The English think Nelson is . . ." He waited, then:

"Come on, Gervais, I want to disillusion you!" Wheedling:

"Won't you ever want to write the story of your life, Gervais? Think how much more interesting it would be if you could say 'Things I have overheard.' They'll be the things people will pay to read!"

"It isn't honest, Paul."

"No, but it's history, and you're living in the midst of it, and you're not even interested enough to take a chance! Are you afraid we'll get caught?" . . .

Gervais was stung. He got to his feet, sulkily.

"I'll do it this once, just to show you I'm not afraid," he said, and marched on ahead. Presently he turned, and flung scowling over his shoulder: "And I mean to tell about it at confession the very next chance I get!"

As they approached, they could see the usual hubbub about the tent, rather like the fuss that goes on in a hive around a queen bee. From the

kitchen quarters an appetising smell of cabbage rose into the air. The guard was busy with his rifle, which had jammed, and even gave Paul a friendly nod as he passed, with Gervais trembling beside him. They made their way cautiously to the back of the tent, and knelt down there, under pretence of attending to the pegs. The flaps were open in the front, and the voices were wafted through there, as well as from underneath. To Gervais they were difficult to distinguish between, but Paul seemed to know them all—the sharp, rapid tones of the Emperor, the soothing reiterations of his secretary, the slightly hesitant, gentle voice of Ney, and Murat thick and guttural, as well as other vague tones. The words came in snatches, and were sometimes lost altogether. Gervais put his head against the tent-cloth.

"Who . . . responsible for this . . . ?"

". . . at."

"Why are . . . arrangements . . . cancelled . . . connections . . . Vitebsk?"

". . . recommends that Major Laferty . . . field . . . widow and one child . . ."

"Take down . . ."

"Absolutely. . . . If it happens again I shall . . ."

". . . Any know better than to . . . who responsible?"

And then a burst of chatter, followed by more comprehensible talk.

"We ought to strike at once, sire."

"Very well, have I ever urged anything else?"

"Sire, if you would allow me to try the flanking movement, thus cutting off the enemy from each other—"

"Oh—you are always recommending these flanking movements!"

"Sire, Captain Brabaine wishes to receive your permission to—"

"Tell him to go to the devil and get permission."

"Kutusof has strengthened his left flank, General."

"Nonsense. . . . Five minutes ago, a report came in from Wilson that Kutusof had removed from position A. Read the report."

". . . and on examination . . . no sign of . . . fires . . . there were three hundred. . . . Position A . . . horses . . . joined his ally at . . ."

"Very extraordinary . . ."

"Where's my lunch?"

"Sire . . . the doctors have got mislaid."

"Not too well done, and plenty of bread . . . doctors?"

"Three men have died of gangrene, twelve of . . . a pity."

"Find the doctors."

"Sire . . . been sent out . . . all directions . . ."

"Another report, General."

"Very well. . . . Has Kutusof removed?"

". . . At eight-thirty a slight haze . . ."

"Yes, yes . . . get on!"

". . . Position A . . . fully occupied . . . not less than—"

"Oh, this blasted Position A! . . . Get on!"

". . . no decisive opinion . . . three hundred . . . at the foot of the . . ."

"I ask for your opinion."

"Withdraw, General."

"Withdraw . . . consequences . . . history . . . disaster . . . Paris . . ."

"Moscow . . . occupation . . . Alexander . . . emissaries . . . mislaid."

"If anyone urges . . . this state of the proceedings . . . never have I . . . never will I . . . a final blow . . . Victory."

". . . the last word . . . obedience . . . no medicine, no fodder . . ."

"Where is the fodder?"

"It has been mislaid, sire."

". . . Hell . . . Devil . . . ! Such infernal . . ."

"Another report, sire."

"The chicken is cold, sire. Will you have it cold?"

". . . No soup?"

". . . Alas, sire . . . the cook . . . colic . . . great pain."

". . . must have soup."

"Sire, this report says that Kutusof has definitely established himself in retrenchments at Position K."

". . . authority . . . such absurd . . . our plans . . . Moscow . . . the heights."

". . . deserted . . . Jews."

"September . . . exhausted . . . home."

"Expensive . . . the world . . . a lesson."

"I can't keep up my stamina unless I have soup. Thirty hours in the saddle yesterday. Abominable . . . mismanagement."

"Am I . . . take charge . . . Davout?"

"Ney . . . lower down . . . trust you . . . Wilson . . . bridge."

"I refuse to consider myself as second to . . ."

". . . subversive to discipline . . . childish superstition . . ."

"Dead, poor chap."

"Thirty cannon spiked . . . three thousand dragoons . . . first corps . . ."

"Ammunition . . . retrenchments . . . nightfall . . . mules . . ."

"I tell you I can't make any definite statement yet. It is all too complicated."

And an angry altercation, in which the word Moscow, said exultantly, and Paris, said despairingly, followed each other in turn. Paul and Gervais rose stiffly from their kneeling position, and

walked back to quarters. All Gervais would say was:

"I shall go to confession at the first opportunity."

19

The evening after Borodino the sun sank with almost desert suddenness, as if he were ashamed of the sight before him, and had raised his hands swiftly to hide his glowing face, casting long shuddering shadows over the smoking earth. A thousand bivouacs pricked the blackness on the French side of the field, like the vindictive eyes of tigers, but the Russian side was empty, except for a flickering lantern here and there. After the sounds of the cannon all day, the whole land lay strangely still and dark, waiting. It was only when one's eyes became less dazzled by the bivouac fires, and more accustomed to the darkness of the field, that they could discern the middle light, the faint, sure outline of darker substance against dark, the heaped, thrown forms which undulated the level of the ground. Was the land so still after all? Were these trees, or reeds, that shook in the faint wind? That reared themselves with faint cries, and bowed again, as far as eyes could see? Surely the wind carried strange harmonies. Heavy breathings, sobbings, of piteously patient dying beasts, low thunderous groans of strong men cut down in the midst of the battle, wandering cries of boys, and sudden shrieks, borne on a gust of wind,

as mad and maddening as the mind that framed them. Come, Death. Come, Sleep and Death, here lies a good harvest for you. Reap it quickly. Bring your scythes, and reap.

The wind that carries the cries of men upon its breath far, far (to lose them over the sea, like migrating birds that fail in their path) is tender here too, sweeps back the hair, clotted with blood and dirt, from the pale faces of the soldiers, blows open the stiff collars of their uniforms, cools the poor sweaty brows and hands, kisses the blackened, twisted mouths like a lover. Bavarian, Swabian, Hessian, Westphalian, Bohemian, Viennese, Tyrolese, Switzer, Pomeranian, Parisian, Provençal, Lyonnais, Breton, Marseillais, Moravian, Lithuanian, Venetian, Bolognese, Lombard, Tuscan, Sardinian, Pole, Swede, Norwegian, Englishman, Alsacien, Cossack, and Tartar—the wind is kind to each one of them. Now they are no longer members of empires or nations. They are all bound in the nationality of death. Here is a drummer-boy, so uninjured, on the face of it, that he seems to have fallen asleep over the drum between his knees. His round cheeks are still rosy, his grubby hands still grasp the sticks. Here are a couple of Foot Artillery—their beautiful blue coats scorched and gashed away—their yellow buttons already dulled. Here is a handsome Hussar, with his trousers tied under his boots in the select fashion his regiment pride themselves on.

Here an Italian Light Horse Lancer, under his horse, his mouth open as if he still cried "Vittoria!" and, to his left, the Cossack who brought him down, his bowels torn out by a musket-ball.

Farther up the slopes of the Semyonof heights, where the Russian entrenchments were, the bodies lie more thinly, though sometimes, behind one of those rough affairs of pith and wood, put up overnight, are a dozen or so, stricken down suddenly, an indistinguishable mass of arms and legs. The guns they left are spiked. Here are two enemies, in close embrace, an Austrian and a Russian, their arms about each other's necks, too soundly asleep for waking in this world. It is as if they had decided, even while they came to grips, that they were brothers, and their quarrel no more than a brothers' quarrel, and had lain down together, to talk, heedless of the smoke and battle, and just died. Now they have left behind this wounded, screaming flesh and blood—they have no part with it. Blissful, dreaming faces! Closed eyes! —so rare among the thousands of horrified, terrified, staring ones. . . . Certainly there was no horror here.

20

Down below, though, things were not so idyllic; the plain, acting as a natural drain to the slopes on either side, was always marshy, and the blood made it worse. Although the actual military forces had only withdrawn two hours before, al-

ready the non-combatants were on the field, with their home-made lanterns (some only a potato with a hole scraped in it to hold the candle), flitting over the marshes like Will-o'-the-Wisps, poking here, prodding there, filling the sacks they carried with great rapidity. Julie, with a shawl over her head, and a curious distaste in her heart, was among them. She had often helped Mother Gateau on these occasions (in the place of Mother Gateau's husband, who pleaded a queasy stomach), but now, on her own, she felt afraid. As she sank up to her ankles in the spongy ground, and felt the chilly water creeping into her sabots and bubbling under her toes, she shivered. It wasn't a cold night. Indeed, it had been, as one of the more humorous of the marshals had remarked, "An ideal day for a battle," but there was no moon, and Julie's own lantern had been stolen, when she had put it down a minute to steal some oil to light it with. As she moved forward, she was constantly stumbling over bodies of men and horses, and half-submerged wagons, and gun-carriages, so that she grew so angry she forgot to be afraid, and hurried on. . . .

There were certain rules of etiquette on these occasions: for instance, one always stripped the enemy first, and usually the dead enemy, then the least popular allies, and so on, leaving one's own countrymen to the last. If it had been a big battle, one never reached one's own countrymen. On

this night, there was very little to be got from the Russians. Unlike the men of the Grand Army, they carried no valuables on them, and the uniforms were in poor condition—but what could one expect from baby-killers and heathens? Why, they never even had any music to go into battle with, only that wild, guttural "Hurrah!"; so it was no good looking for odd cymbals or drums or anything. The ponies they rode, too, wore harness made from sacking and ropes. Altogether, a poor selection. Here and there a bearskin helmet was being greedily disputed, and the thick fur gloves went too, but in the darkness of the night it was difficult to distinguish between friend and foe, and uneasy consciences were always put to sleep by the unanswerable logic: "Whoever they may be, they have no use for anything in this world any more!" As long as one left the French to the last, all was well. Occasionally some scavenging cantinier or Master of Provisions crossed the path of the doctors and stretcher-bearers, and was angrily kicked aside. Julie came across a stout man who had just come off badly in one of these encounters. He was rubbing the seat of his trousers with one hand, and in the other he held two great-coats, an Italian general's waistcoat, three rings, a watch of Venetian design, a miniature set round with seed pearls, and a beautifully chased pair of stirrups. All he could say was, "Old cow! Old cow!" frowning hard in the di-

rection of the overworked doctor, now kneeling by some patient, ten yards off.

"What did he do?" asked Julie sympathetically.

"Old cow! Just as usual," said the cantinier, "kicks me out of the way just as I was getting busy! I'll 'busy' him!"

"But he's smaller than you."

"Ach! He didn't do it himself. See! I was working in the ravine there, and he and his men happened to pass my way. I know he hates us, so all I do is lie down over the man I was working on, and look as dead as possible, but he's eyes like a fox, old cow!" He spat contemptuously, hit his boot with the spittle, and wiped it off carefully with the Italian general's waistcoat.

"He comes up—see? Taps me on the shoulder, 'You're a bit early on the job, my man, aren't you?' says he, and then rattles off his little piece, 'Camp followers—sutlers—vagrants—other—non-combatants—not—allowed—field—battle—till—wounded—attended—permission—given—passes—produced.'" He jingled the rings in his hand and said sorrowfully, looking down at them:

"This war business is getting too professional for me—they'll kill the spirit of it if they're not careful. When I joined up there was no nonsense about passes and permission. One took the risks, and one got the reward. Now it's all risks and no reward." He sighed again. Julie asked:

"But what did you say to him then?"

"Oh—all I said was that I liked to be punctual, so he said, 'Well, you may be punctual here, but you're far too long overdue in hell!' Then one of his great louts comes up and gives me a kick that would kill a horse! Take it from me, these doctors are inhuman!"

"Still, you've not done so badly," said Julie, fingering the stirrups.

"I was always lucky," said the cantinier modestly.

"My lantern may be poor, but by now my eyes can pick out anything of unusual interest or value. You get good prices, too, if you wait long enough. It's a mistake to sell for a week or so." He paused, then frowning: "If that old cow would get a move on," he said, "I'd show you quite an unworked place. It's the *injustice* of it that annoys me," he added. "These doctors assume we've no right on the field. We've as much right as they have! More, because they get paid for joining the campaign. Why, this is what I enlisted for," he said, fingering his treasures. "I make no profit worth mentioning at the wines and victuals, and the discomfort!" He spat again, but more carefully. "And then, to be treated as if you were a civilian out-of-bounds, it's sickening!" As suddenly again, his mood changed. He became maudlin, reminiscent.

"Ever know a man called Herscholt in the 4th Strasburg Artillery?" he asked, and, on Julie

shaking her head, "He was a great wit, as full of fun as a cake is of currants. Always before battle he'd say to me, 'Well, Simon, it'll be me you'll be working on next!' and then he'd take out a miniature from his pocket, that he knew I envied him, and laugh, and laugh—! He used to say I could have his boots and gear, but he'd make a point of swallowing the miniature, just so I wouldn't get it. . . . Oh—he was a wit! Only last night he said to me—"

"He's killed, then?"

"My dear—of course. He said to me, 'I'll cheat you out of the miniature yet, Simon!'—yet, you see?" He lifted up the miniature so that Julie could see it, with the most curious mixture of apology and triumph in his voice.

"He was too late to swallow it," he said.

Julie smiled and nodded at the joke, but her feeling of distaste returned. Suddenly she wanted to get away from the cantinier and his trophies. She stammered something and fled, barking her ankle against a wheelspoke as she did so. She was thinking of the terrible surprise of death, and of how awful it was that the stout man hadn't been sorry that Herscholt had been killed, but only pleased that he got the miniature. She thought: "If a friend of mine was killed—" and the certain word went through her swiftly like a sword, "Gervais!" making her catch her breath. She had been so busy lately, she had forgotten

about the dragoon, and now here she was, trembling for him, as sick and shaking as if she had thought of nothing else for days. The horror of the shambles round her grew stronger and stronger, achieving a personal significance. Hitherto, these evenings after battle had had the commonplaceness of an unpleasant dream, no more. This one was no less than nightmare. Every form that moved and moaned at her feet as she passed might be her lover, yet she dare not stop, dare not risk pity on a stranger.

Long, long ago she had asked her mother, "Why don't you help the wounded?" Mother Gateau had shrugged her shoulders. "There are too many," she had said. "The nuns look after them in the hospitals, and the doctors can look after them here. I have my own business." But Julie hadn't listened to the rest. She knew the real reason. *There are too many.* To-night there were too many, and she dare not stop, even when hands reached up and caught at her skirts—they were nothing more than brambles, those hands, while Gervais was sick, wounded, dying perhaps! She began to run, and lost a sabot in the mud, discarding her other. Like a hammer her heart thumped, and always two messages, "There—are—too—many—I—must—find—Gervais. There—are—too—many—I—must—find—Gervais—" Horrible pictures forced themselves upon her thoughts; ghastly possibilities—Gervais mad

with thirst, screaming for water, Gervais blinded, sitting rocking and moaning, Gervais with his legs cut away. None of them imagination, all of them exampled round about her. From Julie's eyes, those eyes that wasted no sentiment, no smiles, no tears, tears were flowing. Bivouac lights danced like stars before her—she was at the edge of the French slopes again. She saw a sentry too late, and crashed into him. He was just off duty and correspondingly cheerful.

"The First Regiment of Dragoons?" she gasped.

"They're not here, vivandière—they're barracked three miles away."

"Did they—come—off—well, to-day?"

"Well? I should say so! They were never near enough to get the ribbons of their perruques singed!"

"Near?"

"I mean they didn't fight at all. They're being held in reserve like the rotten Guards!"

Her relief was so intense that she nearly fell, and the tears flowed faster. Standing there barefoot, one hand to her forehead, the other dragging the shawl behind her, and with tears of tiredness succeeding tears of terror, she looked no more than a child. The smoke from the nearest fire kept obscuring her from the sentry, but in the intervals she seemed very young to him. The rosy glow of the flames played over her feet,

flushed the line of her thin arm with pink, filled out the hollows of neck and shoulder, made her face as moving, as rarely beautiful, as the petals of a rose. A strange sight on the borders of a battlefield! He put out his hand to take her, but she was too concerned with other things, and put her hands together, and said, twisting them:

"Three miles . . . ?"

"Eh?" said the sentry. She hadn't spoken above a whisper.

"The First Dragoons—?"

"Oho— It isn't Dragoons you ought to be thinking about—it's bed. What are you doing out by yourself at this time?"

Julie didn't hear, didn't answer, and when another gust of smoke had appeared and disappeared, she seemed to have been consumed in it. The sentry wasn't superstitious, but he crossed himself for safety, and joined the others as fast as he could.

Meanwhile Julie found the road. It was comfortingly firm after the muddy slush, and she began to run again. If she had had a proper meal that morning, and slept properly the night before, she wouldn't have been doing anything so profitless. Once she had found that Gervais was safe, she would have gone to bed. . . . But to-night, the word, which had gone through her like a sword, stayed, and drew her on like a magnet. She was even thankful that she had lost her

sabots, for she could go much faster without them. As she ran, she didn't think about how she was to see Gervais, or where, but she went with the certain instinct of an animal, not with the contriving, doubting mind of a human. She would see him, that was all she knew, and she ran, holding the crucifix between her two hands. . . .

"First Dragoons?"

"Farther down the road, vivandière."

"First Dragoons?"

"These are the Fourth Carabiniers. First Dragoons are quartered two mile ahead."

"First Dragoons?"

"My orders are to refuse information to anyone without a pass."

"Whither away so fast, little girl?"

"First—Dragoons?" . . .

She was walking now, very slowly. She felt sick—perhaps she was going to die. She would not die till she had seen Gervais, however angry he might be. Perhaps his mood had changed again by now, and he wouldn't deny he had loved her. It wouldn't matter much if he did. At least she would see him. It was absurd to feel sick—she hadn't eaten anything that day, so how could she be sick? As she went, the new day seemed to follow her like a shadow, the road grew lighter, trees etched themselves against the sky. . . . She was walking away from Russia—she was walking

back to France. It would be better to die in France. . . .

"First Dragoons?"

"First Dragoons, vivandière."

"I—want—to speak to—Lieutenant St. Siriac . . ."

"You're lucky to find him up—he's out at the back there—" He jerked with his thumb. Keeping her hands against the wall of the house to guide her, Julie stumbled round to the back. There was a filthy stench of latrines, and some scurvy-looking hens were asleep on a broken fence, like a row of shrunken witches, but there was a hill at the back, too, and somebody sitting there. With her last ounce of breath she began to climb up, pulling at the short tufts of grass. It took her ten minutes.

"My lieutenant—?"

Gervais turned. He had been thinking of mighty things, like war, and love, and death, and the rise and fall of empires. He saw an opal sky behind Julie—just Julie and the sky—and reached his arms out to her, and enfolded her, stroking her hair, smoothing her dress, rocking her in his arms. She sighed, as a kitten does before it falls determinedly, contentedly, asleep, and her head feel heavily in the crook of his arm. The opal sky was changing, from feathery iridescence to a warm, stippled shade of gold, that was thrusting

out the pinks and the purples, and gilding the sleepy clouds. Suddenly, straight ahead in the far distance, Gervais saw spires and domes and temples grow up from darkness like flowers with dew on them, glittering, preciously, intangibly fair. . . . He caught Julie to him with one arm, and pointed with the other towards that azure-golden city, growing into a jewel under his eyes. He felt enormously, responsibly privileged, as if he were watching the Creation of the world. He thought: "God is raising it up from the earth. He has put down His hand from the sky, and His fingers are drawing up the spires of the churches. He is making it of glass, of fire, of ice, of all lovely fragile things. The whole city trembles with beauty. . . ."

Aloud he said, in a kind of ecstasy:

"Look, Julie—Moscow!"

Julie was asleep.

BOOK II

THE HEART OF RUSSIA

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THE HEART OF RUSSIA

I

WHEN the Grand Army saw Moscow for the first time, and had called the name like an invocation, it seemed to them that a day's march would take them there. That is the way Hope deals with us, minimising distance. Actually it was a week before they reached the city. To while away the time, they invented wild rumours amongst themselves, and even grew to believe them, when they came to their own ears again.

"Alexander is in Moscow!"

"Who says so?"

"Pignon. Pignon, who told you Alexander was in Moscow?"

"Oh—I heard Captain Lissère tell Major Legrand, 'We shall have our work cut out for us then,' he said."

"But Alexander—I heard he was at St. Petersburg."

"Ah—that was only a story to deceive us. You'll see. He's probably in the Kremlin at this moment, recruiting English troops."

"Ah—I shouldn't be surprised."

"Why English troops, Pignon?"

"Because they hate us, silly, and that was why this war started."

"I thought it was the liberation of Poland."

"My best friend, who was killed at Mojaisk, said we were fighting because the English had broken a sacred law—one of the laws the Emperor invented, something about promising not to sell things to the Russians, and that the Emperor had brought us here to punish them."

"Who—the English?"

"No, the Russians, for buying the things when he told them not to. He's going to deal with the English later."

"Was that why we were having all those manœuvres at Boulogne?"

"Of course."

"The cook in camp B. says he has a brother who married a Chink, and *she* says the Chinks are sure to be waiting in Moscow, and that we were to watch out for boiling oil, which they will pour from the walls."

"Ah—they're very old-fashioned, the Chinese."

"Do they use elephants?"

"I couldn't swear to that, of course, but they say that Alexander's deformed, and that he has such a cruel mind, that even his own courtiers are terrified of him. He spends every day except Tuesday thinking up new tortures."

"Why not Tuesday?"

"Because Tuesday's their fast-day. Well, when he's thought of a new one, he sends out and catches the French residents in Moscow, and practises it on them."

"I wonder they don't leave."

"If they tried to they'd only be flogged to death. That's how it is, you see."

"I expect that's what we're fighting for, after all. The liberation of French residents, not the liberation of Poland."

"It was funny about the King of Westphalia being sent home, wasn't it?"

"What did he do?"

"He was a Russian spy all the time. That was why they kept retreating. He warned them we were coming."

"I heard that he was rude to the Emperor, and ridiculed his seat in the saddle, but I didn't know—"

"It was *obvious!* Why, look at his behaviour in the last battle. He just sat in the saddle and gibbered. He looked like a monkey riding a goat, and when the Emperor remonstrated with him, he said he was sorry, but his men had run amok, and he couldn't control them."

"He must be mad."

"He was. The Emperor sent him home labelled, 'This side up; if you turn him the other way his brains run out at his feet.' "

And so on, and so forth. In the higher strata

the stories were not quite so wild. The soldiers were like children who have been promised for days that they shall be taken to the Zoo, and who discuss with eager imagination the strange species they will see there; but the officers were like the nurses of the children. They have been to the Zoo before, and they are concerned less with the animals there, and more with counting the tickets for the turnstile, and seeing that the wilder children don't try fondling snakes. Altogether an increasingly harassed atmosphere disturbed their conversations. They were sobered, too, by the recent massacre at Borodino. A larger proportion of commissioned officers had been killed than ever before. Like a game of chess, they played the battle over and over again in theory, searching for the weak spots, or justifying the procedure. Officially the battle had been a victory, and the Emperor had sent orders to the Bishop of Metz to give thanksgiving publicly in the church. Paris, as usual, took the news more as an affirmation of what they already knew than as a joyful surprise. The capital rejoiced, and held revels, and more and more ladies of high degree appeared in the boulevards undressed in the garb of ancient Greece; but, despite that fact, the whole proceedings had the fundamental decorousness of a church bazaar. It was one more smashing victory for their marvellous army, and, with true Gallic caution, they would not indulge in any fine, care-

less raptures until the letters arrived with the Moscow addresses. Still, it was a victory, and they rejoiced accordingly.

Unfortunately, the Russians declared it a victory too, and the people of St. Petersburg hung out *their* flags, but with greater thanksgiving in their hearts, with a more fervent gratitude to God. The news had come like an answer to their combined prayers, and they felt all the meek adoration that the weaker side always feel when they are delivered from the stronger. But there was sophistication in St. Petersburg as well as in Paris, and most of the *intelligentsia* put the change in their fortunes down to Kutusof's appointment as General-in-Chief. There had been bitter opposition to this appointment from a certain section of the aristocracy, and these gentlemen now slunk about with their tails between their legs, the hated sound of "I told you so!" ringing in their ears. The "Thorough Tartar" had given a shock to the greatest combined force in the whole world. He had *not* retreated, and he had killed man for man, officer for officer. Pro-Kutusofs and Anti-Kutusofs rejoiced together in that, and one of the richest and most influential men in the town convulsed the community by stating quite loudly that he had been mistaken in his opinion. The town was illuminated, but not so brightly as Paris, and the churches were filled, but not with such smart people as in Paris. The Emperor Alexander ap-

peared on the balcony of his palace for a brief time, and to the ecstatic crowd below his features seemed holy, emaciated, spiritual as the features of a saint. He spoke gravely to them, saying that this joyful event showed unmistakably whose side God was on, and added that in the midst of their rejoicing they must not forget those brave men who had given their dying breath in the protection of "This dear Land," and who, even now, were lying stiff and cold on the plains of Borodino. He also said humbly that they knew as well as he did that he was no general, or he would have been the first to meet the invader, but that certainly God had inspired him to put Kutusof in charge. Kutusof, he said, could be likened to David meeting the Goliath of Napoleon with only a pebble and a sling. He quoted the verse from the Scriptures: "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield; but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the Armies of Israel, whom thou has defied," and his voice sounded like the voice of an angel. He comforted them, too, with the other verse, containing the lines: "For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hands." That, he said, would apply to Moscow, but his voice trembled as he pronounced the precious syllables. . . .

When he had gone in again, the talk was still of Moscow. They went to bed thinking of it, and they woke up thinking of it. Although over three

hundred miles separated the two towns, most of them had relations or friends there, and it was the Holy City, for it contained the Kremlin, and the Palace of the Czars of all Muscovy. A holy diadem, set in frozen snow—the secret place of their hearts. Hitherto the base sunshine had betrayed them, had taken the invader right up to their gates. Now they would wait patiently, to see what God and Kutusof, and, of course, the Governor-General Rostopchin, could do for Moscow. . . .

As the crowd dispersed they talked among themselves:

"They say Rostopchin is recruiting hard and fast."

"I wonder if my cousin Maria Gregorovna will stay, if the invaders enter?"

"The French are not like ordinary invaders. We know a man who lived near Berlin when they came. They stole all his valuables, were sick all over his thirteenth-century staircase, and ruined his wife and daughter."

"The French are not so bad. It's those black troops I'm afraid of. Thinking of them keeps me awake at night."

"Black?"

"Absolutely. He has a whole regiment of cannibals. They give them the prisoners to eat. It saves the cost of keeping them."

"You don't mean it!"

"I do. That monster was always crazy about saving money. He never pays his troops, so they plunder to make up for it. I'm afraid your cousin Maria Gregorovna is in for a bad time."

"They say the French residents in Moscow are behaving abominably. They flout the city authorities in every possible kind of way, and refuse to pay any taxes, because they say that once their 'Little Corporal' arrives, he's going to change all the laws."

"He may be a monster, but how is it he has conquered like this? All Europe is afraid of him."

"They say it's witchcraft, but not even his own court knows it. He goes to confession like the rest, but really the monk is only a witch dressed up. She does something disgusting, I don't know what, and the result is that nothing can hurt him. D'you realise he's never been wounded in battle? Naturally that sort of thing gives his soldiers an idea that he's immortal, and they'll follow him through fire and water."

" 'M. It seems terrible that people should employ witches in the nineteenth century."

"It only shows that every place isn't as civilised as Russia. That's why there are so many French residents in Moscow."

"Poor Moscow!"

"They say Napoleon's deformed, and that he

has such a cruel mind that even his own courtiers are terrified of him. Whenever he's thought of a new one, he sends out and catches the Russian residents in Paris, and practises it on them."

"Practises what?"

"Tortures."

"How terrible! Well, he will get his punishment in the end."

"Yes, that is likely, but I wonder how."

"I think I can guess how. Feodor, have you ever considered that when God made Russia, He gave her a special gift to protect her from invaders?"

"It's a bit early to talk about protection."

"You're right. It *is* a bit early, but a month or so—" The speaker pointed up on to the roof of the church opposite them. "The snow was five feet deep before it fell off there last year," he said.

The other man nodded understandingly. "I had forgotten about the snow. Great are the wonders of the universe," he said.

2

From the summit of Pilgrim's Hill, the Emperor of France, standing in his stirrups, looked down upon the chief city of the Czars. A faint morning mist still partially obscured the view, but not enough for the French to fear that they were

still looking at a mirage. They knew that at last they were within reach of their objective. Several generals on their horses were grouped round the Emperor. One had dismounted, and was using the stout shoulder of a sergeant to rest his telescope on. The horses shifted their weight from one foot to another, and tossed their heads, so that the bits tinkled like bells in the clear air. The voices of the men were low and pleasant, very different from the same voices overheard in the tent, and sometimes long, peaceful pauses intervened.

Above the brightness and glitter of the uniforms, and above the brightness and glitter of the town, moved huge clouds, like many-masted ships, carrying full sail. They passed over Pilgrim's Hill, over Moscow, and away to the east. The horse the Emperor was riding grew tired of doing nothing, and lipped at the neck of the nearest marshal's horse. The nearest marshal's horse, a nervous, strawberry mare, showed the whites of her eyes, and tossed her head again, so that the white foam from her jaws flew up on to the map her rider was holding, and completely covered Moscow. Somebody laughed.

"Hullo—Moscow's got snow!" he said.

"That was a silly thing to do," said the Emperor's horse, a white mare.

"Well, don't tickle like that. It makes me nervous," said the strawberry.

"Can't help it—I must do something. I'm bored," said the white.

Another horse in the rear gave a loud chuckle at this.

"You may laugh," said the Emperor's horse, "it's new to you; you forget I have to do this six days out of seven, and it gets on my nerves." She pawed daintily with her foot, and arched her neck so that the creases in it showed like neatly-folded snowy linen. The Emperor patted her absent-mindedly. The map fluttered in the breeze, and again the strawberry mare started nervously.

"It's this pesky bit of paper they keep crackling over my head," she complained. "It sounds like gun-shots."

"Well, what of it?" said the Emperor's horse. "Anything's better than this inaction. The whole thing's meaningless, of course, but—"

"You mean it's meaningless to us," interrupted the horse behind, "but surely they have some reason for coming all this long way, and leaving their comfortable homes, and getting killed, and not having enough to eat? I couldn't go on unless I thought they knew what they were about, even if we don't." . . .

"I really have my doubts," said the Emperor's horse, "though, mind you, I don't think it's just aimless self-satisfaction on their parts. Indeed the Little Fellow that I look after works hard

enough at it. It's as much as I can do to keep him in the saddle sometimes, but Lord bless you, not being able to ride doesn't stop him! . . . You've no idea what jokes the grey and I have about it when we're together," she went on. "Grey does one day, and I do the next, and whenever we go back to stables we're both trembling like a leaf at the strain of it."

"But he can't fall off when you're standing still," said the strawberry.

"Well—he's no tight-rope walker," said the white, and moved rather unexpectedly. The Emperor bounced, and put both hands on to the pommel of his saddle. He was still frowning at the map. "That's what I admire about him," said the white. "He goes on trying, though it must be as unpleasant for him as it is for me. The only difference is that he wants to do it, and I don't. At least you *think* he's got a good reason for it," she added to the horse behind.

"I'm open to conviction," said the horse, "but it seems to me that if we don't trust to them to have a damn good reason at the back of all this recruiting, and manœuvring, and hurrying here to kill somebody, and rushing away from there, to avoid being killed, why! the very fabric of civilisation must fall through. We must have *faith* in what they're doing," he added earnestly, "however inscrutable it seems to us. It's our religion."

" 'M, then I'm afraid I'm an atheist," said the white.

3

Down below, some distance behind, Gervais St. Siriac was cursing his servant heartily for not having shone his boots up properly. The man's eyes were suspiciously swollen, but Gervais didn't seem to notice that. It was Paul who rescued the poor man, and took him outside and talked to him. He re-entered some moments later and shook his head, sighing, at Gervais.

"In most respects, I'm older than you, Gervais," he said. "What did you want to make that poor fellow's flesh creep for?"

"He didn't clean up my top-boots properly."

"Of course he didn't. He found out last night that his best friend was killed most horribly, and he's been awake thinking about it all night."

Gervais' mouth drooped sullenly:

"When I want you to dictate about brotherly love, I'll tell you," he said. "At present we're engaged in brotherly hate, and if I'm going to stop to wipe the eyes of every bereaved soldier I might as well resign. I've other things to think of."

"Ah—the girl," said Paul. He'd heard about the girl from the others. Gervais glowered at him.

"Will you shut up about the girl?" he muttered. "This might be a mixture of church and music-

hall from the sort of conversation I get from you. One minute it's highfalutin advice, and the next it's low-bred insinuation."

"Oh, it's not the girl I'm worrying about," said Paul. "She may be a nice little piece, but it's so silly of you to have anything to do with a vivandière. Why couldn't you wait till you got to Moscow?"

Gervais rose, tugged his boots on viciously, and went to the door. He took down his big coat, flung it over his arm, and turned to Paul. "I'll have you remember, from now on, that I'm your superior officer," he said, snapping out the words. "I have been put in command of this regiment until further orders from headquarters in Moscow. If there is any trouble from you I shall report you to Marshal Oudinot." He put his hand on the door-handle. Paul came up quickly.

"Sorry, old chap," he said. "I didn't know you'd feel it like that—I thought it was just a casual affair."

"It's none of your business anyhow," said Gervais. Suddenly, inconsistently, he grasped Paul by the arm, and staring up into the roof, he said, in a hushed voice: "If you could have seen it, Paul. The wonder and the glory! It was the creation of the world. I wasn't Gervais St. Siriac any more, I was the first man that God created, and I was looking on as He raised a city out of the earth. The world was empty of everything else,

except music, music in the air! There was nobody else, do you hear? There was no campaign, no Russia, nothing. I was in a place without history, without time. And yet everything was praising the glory of God! The grass, and the trees, and the clouds, and the clear air. . . . Then *she* came, and we sat together and watched, till dawn. . . . We held each other's hands, and watched." The vision in the roof faded. His eyes dulled, became anxious, searched the eyes of Paul.

"That's why—talking about her—like anybody else—seems blasphemy," he said. "Because she was privileged to share that wonderful experience, education, with me. I don't know that I love her, or love anybody. . . . I only know that she seems —apart."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know. She left again early that morning. I told her I would come to her, in Moscow."

"I see. Well, I'm most awfully sorry I was so idiotic just now. You're worth two of me, Gervais, though I have got all the brains!" He paused and laughed shamefacedly. "By the way, I ought to own up; it was on the way, on this campaign, that I gave away my crucifix to a girl." He fidgeted under Gervais' stare. "So you see people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

Gervais had turned on him like a shot before he completed the sentence.

"On the way here?" he said. "I thought it must have been in Paris—or at Versailles!" He grasped Paul's arm again. "Where was it?"

"Can't remember. Somewhere in Poland, but why—"

"Think, you fool, think! What was she like?"

"I couldn't see, I tell you. It was too dark. Anyhow, why all the fuss? I haven't broken any of the regulations—"

"Did she speak with a northern accent?" It hurt him, terribly, to say it.

"I can't—"

"Did she call you 'my lieutenant'?"

"Probably. It's impossible to remember. I tell you it was dark. We didn't talk much." Something in the burning intensity of Gervais' eyes struck him. He gasped.

"Gervais—you don't think—?" Gervais had released Paul's arm and was standing with his head hanging low, and his eyes shut. The long coat slithered to the floor like a shadow. When he spoke, the words came unevenly at long intervals.

"That—explains it, then. That was—why. About the crucifix, and I thought she— Oh, God!" The word was low and shuddering, more a reproach than a prayer. He went on, without expression: "You've broken my dream. I told you what happened, on the hill, and how—there was only we two—on the earth. . . . At least, I

thought so, but you were there too, damn you!"

"Gervais, I—"

"You swine, can't you see, she mistook you for me? We're the same height, it's the same uniform, and it was dark! You've broken my dream! You've made it common and dirty, like all the rest!" He had forgotten all about what he was going to do, about the arrangements he was supposed to make, about everything but Julie. Paul, scared, backed against the wall, and watched him striding to and fro in a restless agony. Every now and then he would stop, and come up to Paul, and add something else to his story of misery. "You don't know what having her—in this campaign—has been to me," he said. "It's been what the Bible calls the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. It's not been anything to do with dragoons or vivandiers, or anything. Only that . . . whenever I have seen her, she comes like a surprise . . . like a flower, Paul," he said, and stood, pressing his cupped hand against his eyes. He stood so for a few minutes, then he said: "All this killing . . . all this killing!" and a shudder ran through him. Suddenly he stretched his hand to Paul, and fell on his shoulder. "I don't think I was meant for a soldier," he said, his voice hidden in the stuff of Paul's coat. "I can't forget things. You'd think that when you got to sleep it would be all right, but I dream. . . ." Again the shudder ran through him. Paul said nothing, but

his grip tightened on his brother's shoulder. "That was why I was harsh with Jean this morning. I knew about his friend, but I couldn't—I couldn't say anything. The only way I can keep going is by putting armour on my heart, and seeing—Julie." His voice sank to a whisper.

"You can still see her, Gervais."

"No. It means nothing now. It would be just like anything else."

"You make me feel a swine!"

"No. You didn't do it on purpose, any more than the heavy wind and rain beat down a flower deliberately. They don't mean to drag the petals in the mire, but they do—they do!" He raised himself as he said it, and set his face. Paul stooped, and picked up the overcoat. As he held it for Gervais, Gervais said slowly, looking at it: "When I put *that* on again, I am putting on the dragoon. I must keep on the dragoon, until the campaign, or my life, is finished." He slipped his arms into it, and said half-whispering: "But it's heavy—heavy!" and went out.

As he went, Paul heard the "Fall-in."

4

That trumpet-call was the first signal for action that day. The soldiers were relieved to hear it, and fell in with unusual celerity. All day they had been asking each other, "What are we hanging about for?" and not being able to supply the

answer. Only the General, and a few of his favoured officers, knew that they were waiting for a signal from Moscow, but Moscow had done nothing. This was not the way of vanquished cities, reasoned the authorities. Not that Moscow was vanquished yet, but it was a foregone conclusion, and waiting was only giving them a reasonable opportunity for coming out with a deputation and offering the Emperor a bloodless victory. That was becoming quite the fashion with a big town. It made the whole thing seem more amicable, and was much less expensive for both sides. Moscow, however, appeared to be going to do neither the fashionable nor the slightly out-of-date thing. Moscow just did nothing. The walls of the city might have been the walls of a graveyard. No smoke rose from among the massed cupolas and spires, no flags flew. So must a town look when a terrible plague has passed through it, leaving only sticks and stones standing.

Behind the city a moving cloud of dust raised various conjectures in the Army: the Russian army retreating again, blast them; the cows coming back to be milked; Alexander showing his heels; a wood on fire. . . . None of these, however, was the real explanation. The cloud of dust hid refugees, peasants, harnessed to their own carts, sisters of mercy, their black gowns white with dust, crying children, stolid-faced farmers

and moujiks, women with remembering eyes, French residents who feared the sudden materialisation of France. The peasants brought with them their family ikons and images, even when they had to discard a necessity of life to make room for them. Their pace, perforce, was slow, and once outside the city gates they never looked back. They had renounced, in one day, all that it had taken them a lifetime of pain and labour to build. Well, it was over, it was no good regretting. Now they must start again. The children asked, "Where are we going?" and their mothers hushed them, ignorant of what answer to give. Some few had oxen for their wagons, moving with all the rhythmic inevitability of drama. The men wore blouses, loosely belted, and blue trousers. They were bearded. The women went barefoot with shawls over their heads. Goats pulled at their collars, and paused to browse by the roadside. An old woman, her face Dürer-like in its many lines, sat weeping, not a mile out of the city, with her head hidden in her shawl. The children dawdled, pulling at their mothers' skirts, and demanded to be carried. A little girl of eleven staggered along, holding a fat baby of five. Another one carried a pet lamb. When they came to the images of the saints, or the *prie-dieus* and crucifixes which lined the roads, they all knelt. Sometimes they sang. Then they went on, and the sun sank, and they walked into

the darkness; the second Flight from Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, the Assyrian, with much running to and fro of orderlies, and much giving and countermanding of orders, and also much gleeful, innocent excitement, was preparing to come down like a wolf on the fold. After all, they had been hanging about all day. Did the Russians think they could refuse them bed and breakfast?

If they had known it, everybody hadn't been hanging about. A little official game had been in progress most of the time. It was a combination of hunt-the-thimble and wait and see. The General did the waiting, with not too good a grace, and Marshal Daru did the hunting, the thimble being the keys and deputation. Meanwhile, patience wore very thin—and grumbling began. Here was the new boundary of the French Empire, and yet nobody knew how to behave in it! A few officers and men had been sent down to the gates, found they were open, and entered as nervously as a cat on hot bricks. Once inside, in the long, deserted street, they had clustered round one another, like children who begin to play a ghost-game and then get scared half-way through, and wondered what to do. Daru was definite that they ought to produce a deputation, so they looked about them to that end. The first people they saw were four stable-boys, but, as they couldn't make them understand a word, and as any further endeavour to enlighten them only sur-

rounded them in a cordon of horses brought from the stable, they left them hastily and tried again. Eventually they raked together a miserable selection of men, all convinced that they were being taken away to be hanged forthwith, and then the search for the keys of the town began. Having found a man who could understand, they went by his guidance to all the government offices, the headquarters of police, the Town Hall, and the Governor-General's house. All in vain. The General, having done the waiting, now insisted on the seeing, and was distinctly huffy when no keys could be found. Accordingly he postponed his entry, and spent the night in a little hut by the wayside. Better a truckle-bed in a hut than any breach of martial procedure. Next morning the soldiers weren't particularly sorry when they heard he had been kept awake all night by bugs. "He should have let us enter Moscow yesterday," they said. They were relieved to hear that the Russian army had done the vanishing trick again. Kutusof's unexpected defence at Borodino had been appreciated. Now it would hardly be so acceptable. But they couldn't understand the absence of the civilian population. "Nobody in the streets?" they said.

"Nobody."

"Ah—perhaps they were all indoors, and peeping out through the windows, like in Spain."

"If they were, we didn't see them; it's positively uncanny."

"What does the Emperor say?"

"Very little. He's so angry he can hardly trust himself to speak. Poor chap, it's hard on him, with Ney and Murat and the others all standing round, looking down their noses at him, with 'I told you so' written across their faces as plain as can be."

"They're a pack of ungrateful, forgetful brutes! That's the worst of these educated men!"

"Oh, come! Ney's not educated. He's a very fine soldier."

"Maybe, but he thinks he knows better than the Emperor, and I've no use for that sort of man. He didn't want us to come on here. None of them did, only the Emperor. They thought Borodino was more than enough, and they wanted to turn tail and fly! Although, mark you—we won! Where should we have been if we'd done as they wanted? Half-way home, with Paris laughing at us to our faces, and Moscow behind our backs!"

"Ah—and do you remember what the Emperor said at the time? 'It would be treason,' he said. Every man that met his end at Borodino, every true soldier, would never sleep in peace—we would have broken faith with them. Their ghosts would haunt us."

"All the same, I don't mind admitting I felt mighty like turning tail myself."

"Yes, and what prevented you? Faith in your Emperor! After all, it's not a blind faith, he's never failed us before. No, no, the Little Corporal has a trick or two up his sleeve yet! Besides, it would have been the most tremendous triumph for the Russians. They'd have said that we set out to conquer Moscow, and never even came within sight of the gates. Well, now we'll show 'em!"

"Yes. Now we'll show 'em."

"You bet we'll show 'em!"—doubtfully—"that is, if there's any of 'em there to show."

5

As Gervais gave his final orders before the order to charge toward the Dorogomilef bridge, he frowned continually. For one thing the sunlight streamed into his eyes as he held his head up, and collar and cap-peak co-operated in endeavouring to eclipse his face altogether. In common with the rest of his brigade, he had hastily struggled into his best parade-ground clothes, and was finding them beastly uncomfortable. His mouth felt dry—and as rough as a ploughed field. His head sang as if a large bumble-bee were flying round and round inside it. He felt as if he'd been to sleep in his clothes on a muggy summer afternoon and been rudely wakened by the tea-gong.

Button after button on his new gaiters had rolled away, unused to the strain upon them. His boots creaked and the soles were so heavy that they made him lift his feet high as he walked, as if he were wading through deep water. His scabbard trailed like a sulky child, when he was on foot, and caught in the saddle-girth when he mounted. His bandolier was stiff, and chafed him under the left arm-pit. His musket hit him in the small of the back, as he trotted between the lines. His horse was disturbed by the flies, and pranced from side to side, refusing to give attention to the business on hand. Altogether, he felt unhappy, but only vaguely so. These minor discomforts meant nothing . . . it was before they started, that something had happened. Giddap, you brute! Of course, Julie. Julie . . . jolie . . . so she was, very pretty. "At the word Charge, you will move forward four abreast"—four, how idiotic, it wasn't four, it was two he wanted, just Julie and him—"at a smart trot, reserving the gallop for more public places, and for God's sake keep in formation, because anyone who's fool enough to be left behind will get mixed up with the foot-regiments, and I don't want to be court-martialled."

As he still frowned down the lines in front of him, he found himself wondering if they were really men on horses, or only dummies. He couldn't see the faces. Subconsciously he set his

eyes to find Paul, remembering his responsibility and relationship, and Baba's words. He wanted to warn him to go slow—not to make a fool of himself—and suddenly remembered that the relationship didn't really matter any more. He wasn't an older brother looking after a younger one. He was a man who had suffered wrong from another man, and he felt the dumb, impotent uselessness of everything going on at the present moment. None of this was real. Only Julie and he —and he supposed Paul—were real. And yet Paul hadn't seen the vision. Perhaps he would fade away soon—lose whatever reality he had, re-melt and re-merge into the cardboard panorama before his brother. The horses were whisking their tails restlessly. It wouldn't be long to wait now. Gervais screwed his head over his stiff collar, and frowned upwards to where the Emperor sat his horse, both seemingly carved from stone. He screwed his head the other way—and at the same instant a dull thud sounded, and went reverberating towards Moscow.

Immediately inaction became violent, forward action. Forgetting his own warning to reserve the gallop for later on, Gervais dug in his spurs, and his horse lurched forward, thundering down the road, with the others close behind. As the noise closed over and about him like an engulfing wave, he felt the leaden weight of numbness slip from his heart—felt it fill again with the wines of

noise and speed and triumph. Especially noise: gasping, blowing, shouting, the thunder of hoofs, the sharp slap of stirrup-leathers against the horses' sides, the stifled short commands and curses, the whining creak of the saddles, the wind rushing past his ears—all combined—all were different instruments in the vast orchestra of war. He wanted to throw away his hat, to rise in his stirrups, and shout and sing! . . . The reds and blues of the uniforms ahead sharpened, became blurred, sharpened again. Through the uneven beat of the horses' hoofs could be heard the percussion of a drum, and even while it filled their ears it was lost, merged instead into the blare of a band standing at the roadside, playing, *"La victoire est à nous."* . . . Gervais' horse began to peck at the bit, stretching his head and laying his ears flat against his gleaming neck. Flecks of foamy saliva blew up like bubbles; Gervais cursed his new gloves, unable to feel the reins through them, and began to pull them off clumsily, losing his place doing so. He turned to shout a warning to those behind, and his scabbard struck the already excited horse across the withers. It reared upright, and was immediately knocked over by the horse behind, falling heavily on to Gervais. In a second it had struggled up again, snorting with indignation, and had set off half-heartedly to join the others. The whole thing had happened so quickly that nobody stopped. Naturally they

thought that the dragoon would keep a hold on his horse, and remount and catch them up.

It hurt him horribly, but Gervais managed to roll out of the way of the others. He lay there, face downwards, gasping, the sweat rolling off his forehead, and pushed back the hat with his still-gloved hand. Then he collapsed. The charge continued and, except for a few similar casualties, passed off satisfactorily. Before he had lost consciousness, Gervais heard the sound of hoofs die away, then a pause, then the hurried sound of infantry platoons at the double, the quick breathing of the men, the flappings and slappings of their various accoutrements. At intervals, between these regiments, more horse-hoofs, and an agonised creaking and groaning of wheels, told him that the guns were coming. Suddenly Gervais began to cough—his shoulders shook with great heavings, tears ran down his face, his heart ached with the effort, and with the pain from his leg, which felt badly wrenched. He raised himself on his elbows, and sank again, still coughing. Every spasm made the bandolier cut him like a knife under the arm. He fumbled at it, muttering to himself, and wiping the tears from his cheeks, but another coughing fit came, and he collapsed again —his head completely hidden in the crook of his two arms. It was then that he lost consciousness. In reality, the collapse had been the best thing for him. With his face hidden so, the circling white

dust had no access—although the roads were white with it, and the whole charging army appeared to be moving through a mist, right into Moscow.

All day they were moving, thousands of men and wagons and horses, all towards the town. At night, still the stragglers came, footsore and weary. Only Gervais still lay outside now, even the non-combatants were safely within. The heat and glare of the day had gone with the sun. It was gratefully cool. Stars broke through the sky, and glimmered like the lights of a still unconquered city, aloof, indifferent.

About midnight, Gervais recovered consciousness, and shivered. He was appallingly dusty and dishevelled as he sat there. It was out of the question to try to walk, so he began to crawl painfully, in the direction of the town lights. The grit embedded itself into his hands, and his leg burned with pain, but he set his teeth and jerked along. This raised the sleepy dust again, and tickled his throat, so that the coughing returned. He paused, then crawled on. He seemed to have been travelling for days, and yet never to get any further. He began to think that he was going to die out there, and lay down on his back, staring up at the stars. How very like they were to that wonderful night before, when they had shyly given place to the pure dawn. Would the same miracle happen to-night? There was no

Julie here to-night. He began to wonder where she was—and whether she had found a comfortable lodging-place for herself and the mule. Perhaps she had met Paul, and again mistaken him for Gervais. Perhaps even at this moment they were glad and warm in each other's arms. Lying out there, looking at the stars, he felt curiously indifferent—perhaps it was the pain in his leg—perhaps because he was going to die. He thought how stupid it was, that he should have gone to all the trouble of learning, and that his mother should have gone to all the expense of educating him in, an art which let you down like this—which let you get killed through an accident, before you had really started in your first campaign. . . . Drowsiness overcame him. He slept.

6

Inside the city, the darkness brought a foreign strangeness. All day long sections of different regiments had paraded the streets, looking for the enemy. Coming upon each other round sudden corners, they had taken fright and bolted, and one unfortunate had been shot, owing to the other man's shortness of sight. Those who had nothing to do stood about uncomfortably at street corners, or hung around the hastily-improvised cook-houses. And the tall, white-walled houses had looked down upon them contemptuously, until a nervous individual could stand it no longer, and

flung a stone, smashing the top-most window. The group of soldiers had sprung to their feet, waiting for a head to appear there, and a torrent of abusive language to issue from it. . . . Still the uncanny silence . . . and a tiny tinkle of glass falling into the street. The entire group of soldiers proceeded to bombard the house. Smash. Crash. Tinkle. Shatter. Crash.

That window-breaking was a signal for soldiers all over the town. Shop windows especially suffered, and cabbages and corn and potatoes were soon passing from hand to hand. Shutters were torn down, awnings slashed with swords, and the food left over savagely trodden down into pulp. They seemed to have determined to wreak vengeance on dumb, inanimate objects. Even the officers were casual, either neglecting their men altogether, or turning a blind eye and deaf ear to their behaviour. The cellars, especially, suffered. At every entrance to one might be seen a dozen soldiers or so, in uniforms (so trim and spruce that very morning) already dirty and unbuttoned, fighting amongst each other for wine and spirits, or lying, drunk, their heads in the gutters. A general spirit seemed to pervade the place of "Eat, drink, for to-morrow we die." Those who had reached their billets left them the minute they had discarded their heavy baggage, and rushed out into the streets again. Perhaps it was just a natural desire to get there before all the wine was

gone. Or was it a fear, that these dumb walls that surrounded them might close them in and suffocate them? Already those vague, ragged little men, who carry Rumour round with them like a torch, lighting a thousand conflagrations (in every war, civil and national), were out and about their business. Nobody knew where they had come from, or where they went to. Perhaps they squeezed through the crevices in the ground, and slithered back there when their work was done, and Pluto clapped his hands, and thanked them. The Frenchmen called them escaped convicts, loosed by the Russians at the last moment. The Russians called them French traitors, who spread the tale only to cover their own guilt. Either explanation is equally appropriate. It is certain that they found their way into every little group with their threats and warnings. The soldiers listened, fuddled and stupefied. When the Rumour had come true, they set out to find the ragged men, but they had disappeared.

The story began in many different ways, but it always ended with the same refrain.

"Hurry! Hurry! The town is on fire!"

"The town is on fire!"

"The town is on fire!"

"You have been betrayed. The Emperor has set the town afire to punish you for plundering."

"You are in danger. The Governor-General

put a time-fuse to the arsenal. You will be blown sky-high before morning!"

"Save yourselves—take what you will. The Jews in the market-quarter are trying to smoke you out!"

"The Germans are jealous. They are burning your billets. They have threatened the Emperor's life!"

"The Poles have done it. They want to avenge that blunder at the river. They will stay when we have gone, and get all the credit for the victory!"

"The Italians have done it! I saw a Macaroni cross the road round the corner, with a taper in his hand!"

"It was all one poor lunatic. He poured spirit over his clothes, and set it alight, then rolled in hay. He didn't mean any wrong."

"It was your brother regiment! They were jealous because the Emperor congratulated you after Smolensk. They want to get their own back!"

"It's the Russians. They haven't left the town at all. They are all sheltering down below in underground passages! They have sworn that we shan't leave the place alive!"

And so on, and so forth, crescendo, "The town is on fire!" "The town is on fire!" until more than half the Grand Army believed it, and went and stood round the Kremlin, the palace of the Czars,

waiting to see if their Emperor was safe. But he had gone from there, and still they scurried from place to place, jostling, pushing, drunken, frightened, tired out. . . . And here and there through the crowds sped a Russian, some precious thing clasped to his breast, or a woman with a shawl round her head. Perhaps the very patter of feet on the calm earth raised some unaccustomed flame beneath her, and set the place alight. . . . Before morning those soldiers who were not asleep saw a slow blush spreading over the face of the sky. One soldier shook another roughly.

"Look! Dawn!" But it was not dawn, it was the famous Fire of Moscow.

7

Julie had tethered Rousseau in a green field behind a church, in one of the side-streets near the entrance to the city. She then tied her little shelf on to the railings, and set up shop there, chiefly with the idea of catching the sentries as they came off duty. She would have preferred the main street, but daren't break the law as far as that, so now she sat, on the upturned saddle, her chin in her hands, waiting for customers. The street was deserted, although it connected two of the principal thoroughfares. With fields and church buildings on one side, and ordinary houses opposite, it had not attracted the soldiers. As she sat there, idly letting her eyes stray over these houses, Julie

found her gaze arrested by one particular window. She had thought all the houses deserted, in common with the rest in that part of the town, but now she was sure she saw the lace curtains move in the lower window, with a sort of tremor, as if they had been suddenly pulled back. Instantly she was alert, watching, smoothing back the loose strands of hair, so that nothing should obscure her view. The lace curtains hung still, but Julie felt that the eyes were still watching behind. She got up deliberately, and crossed the road, thrusting her hands deep into the pockets of the faded old dolman. An orderly on a tired horse trotted down the road. He reined in when he saw her:

"Any rum, vivandière?"

"I'm sorry. I'm out of it."

"Never mind," he laughed. "Your restocking won't cost you much. I hear they've burst open all the cellars already. So long!" And he was off again.

By this time she had reached the outer gate of the house. It was unlatched, and she walked through, still with her eyes on the window. She thought she saw the curtains quiver again slightly, and walked up to the window. By standing on tiptoe she could just see through a crack in the curtains. A hand, very small and astonishingly white, slid down the pane, in front of Julie's face. She raised her eyes slowly, and tapped on the glass with her own brown one. It was a foolish thing

to do, but she was filled with curiosity, and had no thought of danger. At the same moment, the curtains were pulled back, and she found herself looking at a girl of her own age. They stared at each other, solemn-eyed, unmoving.

8

The Khovanski family were a famous family in Russia. Their ancestors, they boasted, had helped to build the first deal fence round Moscow, in the days when there was little to protect but lives. They had seen it grow from the refuge of barbarians into the abode of kings. They had fawned and flattered in the days of Ivan the Terrible. They had gone forth in hordes, at break of day, to fight the Goth and Mongol, and returned with spoil. They had hungered and thirsted in the long sieges that their enemies made upon the city. They had shrivelled in the flames that recurred to destroy the wooden churches and palaces, as regularly as the seasons recurred. They had built again, when the ashes of those fires were cold. They had worn German faces, and cultivated French manners, in the court of Peter the Great. And yet still, in all of them, through the fires and the sieges, the wars, the terrors, the Europeanisation, the original Khovanski remained—the original Russian, neither of the East nor the West. The same boasting spirit, the childish turning from tears to laughter, the same

bewildering charm, the same independability. Khovanskis never made history, they deigned to ornament it. They originated the anecdotes associated with kings, they decided the fashion of sleeves, occasionally they died noble deaths. They were as irritating, as icily cold, as beautiful, as highly coloured as the climate of Russia. As at the end of the spring, when the eyes are weary of the waste of snow there, just as one turns one's back a thousand starry flowers push their heads through the gleaming, melting waters, and carpet even Siberia with rugs more beautiful than Persian ones, so the Khovanskis, just as one wearied of their less attractive traits, could blossom like the rose. Their name was legion. They represented the administrative side of the big cities so thoroughly that a proverb ran: "In Russia you can be one of three things, a land-owner, a soldier, or a Khovanski." Several were at the court at St. Petersburg, some had died at Smolensk, and some had just fled Moscow, on hearing of the invader. It was at a Khovanski that Julie was looking now. She saw a girl her own age, but dressed from head to foot in thin, black, flowing stuff, that cascaded about her, emphasising her beauty and delicacy, and helplessness.

Julie thought she had never seen anything so beautiful in her life. The head was small, and proudly set on a very white neck. The hair, so fair as to appear almost silver, haloed the head,

netting the summer light in a thousand places. A narrow black fillet threaded in and out of the hair. The face was, to Julie, the face of a madonna, as pale as marble, with the transparent quality of parchment. The brow was high, but lost in the mist of hair, the nose straight and small, and the saddest mouth in the world, slightly pouted. The eyes regarded Julie gravely, sorrowfully, and the heavy lids to them were weary with the weight of noble blood. Very slowly Julie raised her two hands to her breast, and clasped them as though she were praying. For the first time in her life she was realising Beauty as a quality capable of standing alone. She put out her hand slowly again, and rested it against the glass as if, through it, she should gain some virtue from that other white hand. The weary eyes shifted, from staring at Julie's face, to a slow comprehension of her clothes—the heavy sabots, the faded, hideous dolman jacket, the striped petticoat under the draggled skirt. Then they looked past Julie and at Rousseau, cropping grass in the opposite field. "Yours?" she seemed to say. Julie nodded, delighted at such understanding, then the madonna withdrew. The minute she'd gone, Julie knew that madonna was wrong. She was like a picture in a church, but she had the flaming pale hair of an Angel of the Annunciation. When Julie looked again, there were two angels. Her knees trembled. Two—and both so beautiful!

They signed to her: "Put out your hands." She did so. They seemed content to see that she carried no stick or knife, and the elder of the two opened the window for a grudging space. A scent of distilled lilac swam round Julie, like incense. One of the angels spoke:

"You're French?" Again she nodded, not daring to speak.

The other spoke, so low one could barely catch the words:

"What do you want?"

"I want nothing," said Julie. "I saw you looking at me through the curtains, and I came over."

"The French are all liars," said the second angel, adding, after a pause: "What are you doing in our town?"

"I came with the soldiers."

"Oh—a camp-follower!" They tilted their noses.

"No—a vivandière!" She was hurt by their superiority. This puzzled them, and they turned to each other, knitting their brows and whispering together. Julie added: "I sell wines and spirits to the soldiers, and sometimes food."

The word "food" had a disastrous effect on her listeners. Immediately they were in each other's arms, weeping profusely, turning tear-stained faces to Julie, tossing their pale, flaming hair, fluttering their hands, like silver poplar leaves in the rain.

She said, "Don't, don't," and reaching out, touched one of the small hands, stroking it reverently, soothingly. It was not removed. When the sobs died down, a small voice said:

"We have had nothing to eat since yesterday morning!"

Julie was scandalised. She had had nothing to eat since yesterday morning herself, but she was not an angel from heaven. Fancy angels going short of food! She besought them for reasons. They answered in a lachrymose duet, punctuated with dark references to the invaders. It was a muddled story about one Feodor, and though their French was purer than Julie's own, she caught very little of it. Indeed, she was so bewitched with their appearance that she could do little but gasp as they paused for breath. They ended by demanding food.

Julie wrung her hands: "I haven't got it! Not even for myself. Only drinks. I only get in a stock of food after reaching the big towns. I haven't had time yet!" She asked them why they didn't go out and buy it. They shuddered. "The soldiers!" they said. Of course, she'd forgotten the soldiers. Fancy anybody being afraid of soldiers! "I'll go for you," she said, and was immediately terrified into stepping back, for they had flung the window open, and were leaning out towards her, stroking her dirty sleeve where they could touch it, smiling softly upon her, calling her

"Dear Miss," and "Sweet Miss," and wiping away their tears with fragile wisps of lace. This was terrible. No Revolution could justify such irregularity. Almost angrily she retreated out of their reach, buttoning up her coat to her neck. As she stalked down the path, the flowers and leaves themselves reached out tendrils to her, and tiny thorns snatched at her skirts, as if they, too, would show how grateful they were.

Quickly she bundled up her wares, and hid them in a corner of the field. She decided to leave Rousseau, too, as he would only make her more conspicuous. Looting is easy enough if you go at it sensibly. She prided herself that she wasn't one of the greedy, inexperienced sort who take more than they can possibly carry, and then waste it. She turned round into the broad road, flanked by low, white-walled buildings, with their little gaily-coloured summer-houses, pink, blue, and yellow, each in the front garden. Only last week those gardens had been full of gossip and chatter at dusk, with the moths blundering about among the trees, and the smell of coffee in the air. Now they were deserted, and the very flowers hung their heads. In a side street Julie saw a group of carabiniers trying to open a cask, the splinters from the cellar door filling the street, and decided that that was the quickest way to the market quarter. From there on, the streets were full of soldiers with bulging pockets. So far none of

them dared actually exhibit his loot. Some called after Julie as she strode down the road. Others tried to catch hold of her, but she flung them off ruthlessly, staring straight ahead. God had left those angels behind for her to minister to, and she must have been divinely led to them, she reasoned. She hadn't understood one word in six of how they still came to be in Moscow, but she gathered that the male of the family had left them in the lurch. *She* wouldn't leave them in the lurch! Not by a long chalk—"Keep your hands off me, you lousy brute, or I'll have you in the lock-up!" She passed churches and synagogues, heedless of their style and colour. She passed curiously-painted signboards, and every kind of shop but a food shop, but she never looked aside. Once she even thought she caught sight of one of her own brothers, slinking through a noisome alley, with a basket of fruit under his arm, but she couldn't stop, though she would have been interested to know if the baby had died or not. At last the market quarter began. There were Jews in the crowd here, expostulating with the laughing soldiers who rifled their stores, and having their hats pulled over their noses for answer. One greybeard, the tears pouring down his face, caught at Julie's sleeve:

"Stop them! I will give you fifty roubles. I have only lately moved here from Vilna. It is my life savings in there!"

She answered without looking him in the face: "Well, it's the fortune of war," and went on.

Another little grocer's shop was so low that one had to kneel on the pavement to look into the windows. The soldiers, apparently, had passed it by. She gave the little leaden panes a kick with her sabot, and they shivered inwards, tinkling on to the floor. She felt cautiously for the latch, and the window opened, creaking. She stepped down. The shop was small, but neatly stocked, with a painted label for everything. She took one of each of the larger vegetables that she recognised, and a pound each of the others, stuffing them into a sack that she found there. Carrots, potatoes, beetroots, marrows, beans, she took them all. Farther down the road were eggs, being passed from hand to hand, and broken and eaten raw. Julie took six, and put them down the bosom of her jacket. Farther still, a baker was being made to bake at the point of the bayonet. Though most of the soldiers paid him afterwards, he sulked as he did it. Julie took two loaves, and left an egg in payment. Then, prudently, she turned back.

It was difficult enough to find one's way in a strange town, but laden with eggs and a sack on one's back made it harder. The darkness thickened, and the soldiers no longer dawdled, except the drunken ones, and they were left in the gutters, or lurching along the middle of the road. Up above, in the Kremlin, lights showed, and

other lights began to glimmer all over the town. A church door was open, as Julie returned, and mournful singing rolled forth. She had a glimpse of gold, and silver, and crimson, and purple, and of people with bowed heads, and then she was past. Funny of people to leave their homes, and go and sing in church, with a lot of drunken soldiers about! That was the trouble, she thought. Nobody in this country behaved reasonably. Not even the architecture was reasonable. Apparently they began to build a church, but when they had done one dome, they were so pleased that they did a lot more. But they seemed to have forgotten the plan of the original one, or else they were tired of it, so sometimes, perhaps, they made thirteen domes, all different sizes, all different colours. That is not the way churches should be made, reasoned Julie. One should bring to the matter a reverent spirit. Then the colours!—pinks and blues and gold and silver, all anyhow—sometimes in stripes and sometimes in spots, and sometimes stippled, and sometimes plain, and sometimes with pictures. And the walls round the churches—they always had an entrance where there was no path—and the path led straight up to a blank wall, and the windows were so high up that no one could see out of them, and so low down that the wall hid them. Strange, strange nation, to let its churches be built like that!

She recognised the house again, by the flowers

in its garden. It pleased her to see that the minute she was up the path, the door was opened. For a moment she was afraid she had made a mistake. An old, incredibly old woman had opened the door. Her head was bowed so low that her chin rested always on her chest. Her sparse hair was covered by a peasant's cloth. Her clothes were so old, too, that they seemed to have grown on her, to be covered with the undisturbed dust of days. There were creases in her sleeves, that showed a darker colour when she opened the door, as if it was the first time that arm had ever been stretched. When she opened her mouth, in the effort to recover her breath, it was toothless as a baby's. She closed the door carefully behind Julie, and preceded her up the dark passage, into the drawing-room that looked on to the street. Julie set down her sack, and stood, dusting her hands. In a voice so old and quavering that it sounded more like the string of a guitar, the old woman called upstairs. There was a sound of running feet, and the two girls appeared, skimming downstairs like butterflies, circling round Julie, pausing and quivering on tiptoe about her, until she was so bewildered that she sank down on to the sofa. They began to laugh at this, and their laughter was so tender and endearing, so musical, that Julie began to laugh too, silently and painfully, holding her sides at the unaccustomed effort. When they had recovered, they spoke.

"Have you got anything, dear Miss?"

"I've enough for to-day. I'll get some more to-morrow."

At this they seized her hands—each one took a hand, and kissed it. Two red spots flamed in Julie's cheeks. She snatched them away.

"You shouldn't do that!"

"Why not? We are so grateful, dear sweet Miss!"

"Because—because you are ladies."

"We are Khovanskis," they said, with infinite pride, but, before they had finished being proud, they had begun to be greedy. The younger was on her knees by the sack. As she took out the vegetables, she called the names ecstatically, as if she had never seen them before. The old servant took them from her into the kitchen.

"I thought you said you were alone," Julie said.

"Oh, that's only old Marfa. She couldn't have gone into the town for us. She's too slow!"

A rather irritable soprano voice called from upstairs: "Nat-alia!"

Julie sprang to her feet. "And that?"

"That's Maman. You mustn't mind her, dear Miss. She was frightened of the soldiers, too."

Julie, half-reassured, sunk back, but some of the glamour had gone out of the situation.

Now that their anxiety about food was over, the two girls were filled with intense curiosity

about Julie. They plied her with questions as to her name and age, and what Napoleon was like, and whether the French really burned women alive, and so forth. Cautiously, monosyllabically where possible, Julie answered, and their faces received her story like two mirrors, one minute puzzled, the next smiling, the next frowning. The old woman was laying the table as they talked, pausing now and then to look at the two girls, peering at them with her old eyes, nodding her head mechanically whenever they spoke. At last the meal was ready, and Maman was called. When Julie saw her, she thought at first that she was another sister, until she saw the tired lines round the eyes, the petulant mouth, the slow walk to the table. She was dressed in a most Parisian negligee, foaming with lace at wrist and shoulder, the very lace that would have made Julie's forbears grind between their teeth, "Aristocrat!"

"Maman, see this kind Miss. She has brought us food from the market."

The woman looked at Julie casually, then she yawned.

"The Miss is very kind," she said. "And where does she come from?"

"She came with the French, Maman!"

"Really? I have French blood in me, myself. My grandmother was a sempstress at Dijon."

Julie nodded vacantly. She didn't know where

Dijon was, and she was much too concerned with wondering how these extraordinary people could combine such aristocratic looks with such democratic behaviour. Apart from that remark, Madame Khovanski lapsed into silence. She ate what food was put before her, munching thoughtfully. Once she touched Natalia's arm as she stretched for something, and rose solemnly, and kissed her on the brow. Natalia was spreading egg on bread.

"You don't love me," her mother said. Natalia stopped spreading for a moment, her whole face puckered up. The other sister began to twitch nervously at her napkin. Julie, bolting food, thought: "Damn, another of these family scenes!" She had seen more emotion in that one day than the whole of her family had ever shown in a year. Natalia replied in a torrent of Russian, the mother answered back. The other sister rose up, and apparently vilified her mother in the most impossible way. Natalia turned on her, knife in hand, and for a moment murder seemed likely. The mother left the table, and strolled up and down the room, bewailing the day she was born, and the two sisters wept in each other's arms. And in and out of justifications and recriminations and vilifications, the old woman came, putting down this, taking up that, and apparently thinking nothing of the whole affair. When they seemed likely to collapse from exhaustion, the

younger sister turned to Julie, and, laying her hand on her arm, said:

"My name is Sophia. Will you stay with us?"

Before she had time to answer, they were all three round her, touching her head, smoothing her coat, patting her hands. Yes, yes, she must stay. She had saved their lives, and if she had not already found suitable accommodation, she must stay. They would do anything in the world for her. She must not go back to Paris saying the Russians had no hospitality.

"But my mule?"

"Oh, he shall stay too. He can live in the orchard. Come, we shall show you where," and they caught her by the hands, and were running her down dark passages, and down steps, until she was out in the garden. Then they stopped still, and a bird sang. Nothing else sounded in Moscow, but the singing of that bird. It was pitch dark, and it was as if it had woken specially from sleep, to say to Julie, "Stay here. This is where I have brought you. There is peace here, and a soft bed, and beauty . . . and love," and again the scent of lilac enveloped her. She took the hand of Natalia, and put her arm about Sophia's neck. Now she had something beautiful on either side of her.

"I will stay," she said.

"Dear Miss!"

"And call me—Julie."

9

A week later, and Julie had changed, more completely than she had ever changed in her life. She had been there only seven days, and yet she felt as if she had never known any other home. When she woke every morning in the little room, with the tiny window which looked out on to the city, and saw the spires and citadels glittering in the sun, and the swifts wheeling in the burning skies, crying joyously one to another, she felt that the imagined prophecy of the bird had been fulfilled. She *had* found peace, and beauty, and love. There was no restless longing in her breast to be for ever on the move. She had taken her job, not because she was nomadic by instinct, but because it seemed to be the one thing she knew anything about. And now, this complete change, this quiet, this security, was unspeakably precious to her. Every morning, as she lay luxuriously at rest, the two sisters would peep into the room, calling her name softly, and she would shiver with delight, with closed eyes. Then they would creep in, and touch her arm softly, and perhaps kiss her, and she would pretend to wake, and stretch, and then they would all laugh, about nothing at all, and get into bed together, the two fair, tumbled heads by Julie's dark one. Day by day a little of that cultivated reserve of Julie's dropped away, and the brown face seemed to fill out more child-

ishly, and the pucker of worry above her eyes vanished. Now, at last, she was her right age. She was a girl, growing up with other girls. Heaven, she imagined, could be no more perfect than this. In the morning they had great bowls of coffee, and eggs, and Natalia would sing, dancing round the room as she ate. Madame Khovanski never rose till midday, so they had the whole of the morning to themselves. Sometimes they played in the garden, silly, childish games with balls, or cards, sitting on the warm steps, wrangling amicably together, and often in the afternoon, protected by Julie and Marfa, they went for a nervous little walk in the town, keeping off the crowded streets, weeping for a second when they recognised the house of a neighbour, with broken windows and smokeless chimneys, then laughing at the antics of a mule pulling against a soldier. Julie had come to some arrangement with a drummer-boy that he should loot eggs and bread and vegetables for them each day, and she paid him conscientiously when he came, with the Khovanskis' money. He told her rich tales of the plunder, and jewels and fine clothes to be got from such and such a house, and how so-and-so was discovered with two French clocks in his pockets and had been shot. He watched her as he talked, waiting to see the sharp, hungry look come back into her eyes, but she didn't seem to be interested. She just took the

food and shut the door, and went back to the comfort and happiness indoors.

One evening, when it was warm and misty, the three of them were out in the garden. Julie had slung a swing for them between two pear trees. As she clambered down again, she noticed initials carved on the trunk, F.V.K.

"Hullo—see what I've found!" she called. They came and stood by her, and again the sorrowful look came into their faces, and Sophia's lip trembled.

"What is it?" Julie said.

"It is where Feodor, our brother, carved his name last year," they said.

"Is he—is he dead?" asked Julie.

Without answering, Natalia turned and went back to the swing, sitting down, and swinging herself gently with her foot, looking at the ground. Since the first three days they had neither of them worn black. They were both in fluffy white dresses, diaphanous as mist, and one wore pink, and the other blue, ribbons.

"We told you about Feodor the first day that you came," Natalia said, swinging gently, her head bent forward on her slender white neck. Little by little, the story was told again. Feodor, it appeared, had been a remarkable lad, brilliant and handsome, and very moody. He was a true Khovanski to look at, they said. He had taken after his father, with the high, flat cheekbones of

the true Slav, and the dark, flashing eyes. He was older than they, and Maman and the two girls had utterly depended on him. Maman, it is true, had a small pittance from a distant cousin, and a little from a Government pension, but Feodor had an excellent job at the Criminal Courts, which kept them all. He would leave early in the mornings, his little leather case under his arm, and sometimes not get back till late at night. Marfa never went to bed till he got home. She liked him to have something hot before he went to bed.

Julie began to see, painfully clearly, that though Feodor may have been adequate in his way, the real support and prop of the place was Marfa. When the father had died, two years after the young king had been crowned, it was Marfa who kept them alive, by a system of beg-borrow-and-steal. And yet not one of them noticed her existence, except to say petulantly, from time to time: "How terribly old Marfa is getting!" And yet she to whom they owed their very existence had never thought herself fit to look them in the face. Not one of them could have told what colour her eyes were. After a long and arduous day, spent in getting them their meals, mending their clothes, fetching food from the market for to-morrow, bringing home the little girls from their dancing-class, darning the stockings and clothes of the boy, fetching a clean handkerchief for Madame, stoking the fires, washing up the

meals, putting warming pans through the beds, locking and unlocking the numerous little cupboards, slip-slopping up and down dark, creaking passages, on their behalf, she was not content. She wanted no lazy hour to herself, to sit and dream by the hearth. No, she spent that hour in lying in wait for a member of that precious family, to help them on and off with coats and boots, still with eyes averted, or, if they were all within, gathered by the fire, she would watch them, shivering a little, through the chink of the door, nodding and talking to herself, or sometimes just crying from pure weariness and joy, at the beauty of the little girls, or the pale nobility of Madame. Her old brown face would crease up, and the yellow tears would come slowly, slowly down, as slowly as the poor old feet travelled up the stairs at night, pausing to let her pray a little prayer at the door of each of her darlings. It was fully twenty years since she had received any wages, but what did that matter to her? She had felt the same protective instinct aroused in her then as Julie had when *she* saw them. This bewilderingly beautiful, unconventional, illogical family! They were her children, all of them. She had adopted Maman when she had come to Khovanski as a young bride, and she adopted the children too. Even now, at this moment, she felt more real grief over the disappearance of the only son than any of his own family felt. It was she who wept for

him at nights, she who prayed for his safe return, before falling asleep for the very short time that the old need. In a way, his sisters were proud of him. They had long wanted him to do something exciting, as befitted his name. Now the thing had come, they felt that they couldn't altogether bewail it. Besides, it was such fun to tell Julie about it. There had been the first day, when Feodor had returned at noon, excited and gesticulating, to say that the invaders were actually outside the town, that everybody who was anybody was leaving, that Rostopchin was very busy, but that, on account of Feodor's name, he was prepared to do anything and everything for his family. He—Feodor—had arranged for a sledge to take them out of town that very night, and now required provisions for it. Half unwilling, and half with a fearful pride in his capability, Marfa had given him everything in the house.

That night, when they went to the appointed meeting-place, they waited an hour, but he never came. A neighbour said he had seen him go, on a sledge laden with Government employees, two hours before.

"I call it a filthy trick," said Julie. They shook their haloed heads.

"Ah, but you never knew Feodor!"

"I daresay, but what would have happened to you if I hadn't found you?"

"We should have died, Batushka. Come on,

push me, and see if I can touch that branch with my foot!"

With a strange pain at her heart, Julie said, as she swung Natalia: "You wouldn't talk so lightly of death if you saw as much of it as I do."

"Never mind, Batushka. You will never see it again. You are going to live with us now, for ever and ever!" And Sophia echoed, "Yes, you're never to leave us now."

The tears rushed up behind Julie's eyes. They had touched upon the one subject that she wished to forget. She answered, very quietly:

"That isn't possible."

"What isn't possible?"

"For me to stay with you—always. I must go with the troops."

"But aren't the troops going to stay here always, horrible people?" said Sophia.

Julie shook her head at such ignorance, smiling: "They'll go back to France, silly."

"Hooray!—as long as you don't go back with them!"

"I should have to go. There's no work for me here."

"Oo-h!" they cried together. "Work? You don't want work. You must stay with us! Sophia, try standing behind me. We shall go higher then. Julie, push Sophia and me together. We're going up to Heaven!"

10

The first fire of Moscow, which had surrounded the Kremlin itself with flames and driven the army out of the town again, raged for five days. But it had been mostly in the lower part of the town that the damage was done. The Khovanskis took it all very philosophically. They told Julie that a town in Russia burst into flames in the lifetime of every Khovanski, and rather appeared to take credit for the present conflagration. They knew that it wouldn't reach their own house, but they would have cared little more if it had. The one thing that worried them was the Kremlin. Seeing that the Kremlin survived, as usual, they rejoiced in the fire, for, as they told Julie, it prevented those dirty rascals from taking their valuables, and living in their houses. The "dirty rascals" themselves were only encouraged by the flames, and robbed and plundered with the greater zest, but several horses had had their legs burnt by the molten lead, running in the gutters like a turgid river, and several men received severe head injuries by falling glass and iron. It was after the first fire, when it was smouldering in sulky little corners, and when the atmosphere was still stifling from the drifting black ashes and smoke, that the drummer-boy told Julie that she was required to report at H.Q. if she wanted to have her regiment again. "Why, are we off?"

she said fearfully. The drummer-boy didn't know, but he'd seen a notice addressed to non-combatants which said she ought to report.

The same afternoon, she went down to the town. Until she was actually in the midst of it, she didn't realise what the fire had done. Whole streets that she had passed through that first day had vanished, and the roads were flanked with smoking heaps of black wood, and full of bric-à-brac, gilt chandeliers, broken bedsteads and chairs, mirrors with elaborate frames, pictures oily with the heat, strips of carpet, broken china, fur, rugs, fire-irons, and glass, glass, glass.

Soldiers were still in groups before every cellar, and were clad in the weirdest clothes, embroidered waistcoats, riding-breeches, women's petticoats, fur gloves, tiger skins and priceless Chinese embroideries. If reprimanded, they replied that everything else of theirs had been lost in the fire. They were curiously intent and quiet on what they were doing. One man, seated on a gilt stool, was struggling with a little box between his knees. His clumsy fingers were too big for the delicate lock. Other men came up and stood round him silently. At last he smashed it down on to the ground, and it flew open. There was nothing in it. The uncanny thing was that the soldiers didn't laugh or joke, or clap him in the back saying, "Better luck next time." They just turned away, their eyes darting everywhere at once, searching

each other, searching the ground and the ashes. They were no longer soldiers, impudently, cheerfully plundering: they were silent, suspicious, like misers, hiding their precious things. And the smouldering ashes surrounded them, black and dead on the surface but glowing red within, as unappeased rage glows. To Julie these men were not the men she had known when they set out on the campaign. They no longer had the individualities of German, Pole, or Italian, or French. They were every one of them eaten up with intense greed, intense jealousy, intense suspicion. They eyed her, too, lasciviously, and attempted to stop her as she went, so that she felt sick at the unhealthiness of it all, the lack of any kind of discipline. The more she compared the soldiers with, inevitably, the Khovanski family, the more her disgust increased. Was it possible that they were always like this, only that she hadn't been educated to notice it before? Was it true, as Natalia and Sophia said, that they were nothing but a lot of barbarians, tormenting a peaceful, civilised country? At that moment she felt all the weight of responsibility, all the shame of remorse, all the terror of what was to come, for the entire Grand Army.

It lasted for a second, then she was at the headquarters for non-combatants. A little room, with the distemper peeling off the walls, two benches, a desk, and a tired official behind it, was what she

saw. The place was full of men, and women with children in their arms and round their skirts. An indescribable babel filled the air. They were, for the most part, pleasant, anxious-faced men and women, mostly elderly with large families. Some recognised her and greeted her kindly. Her mother, they said, had just gone. She had been reprimanded for dishonesty and dirty language. Julie heard it all in a kind of blur. Mother? She had no mother. . . . She asked when they were off. They didn't know, but they hoped it would be soon. There was good looting to be got in the town, but the uneasy quiescence that hung over the place worried them. It was like weather before a storm, didn't she think so? Julie didn't know . . . If there was a storm, was there not a kind home for her to go to, and kind sisters there? At last it was her turn:

"Name?"

"Julie Gateau."

"Profession?"

"Vivandière."

"Regiment?"

"First Dragoons." The tired man looked up at her sharply, but her eyes were staring unseeing at the wall. She was lost in a dream.

"A letter was left for you last week," he said, and handed her something out of a drawer. She took it mechanically, tucking it into her dress, and signed the paper he held out to her.

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

Out in the street again, she opened the letter. Who on earth should be writing to her? It was a single sheet, folded across, and ran:

"My brother Gervais was hurt in the charge yesterday. He is at St. Blaise's Hospital. St. Siriac."

That was the whole letter. She stood staring at it, a hundred sleepy thoughts waking slowly in her mind to the trumpet-call of the one name, Gervais. Gervais, who had said he would come to her in Moscow. Gervais, her friend, her lover, her child. Gervais hurt, wounded perhaps, and needing her. Gervais tossing from side to side, calling her name. Who was this brother who wrote to her? How was it Gervais had never talked of him to her? Apparently Gervais had told him of her, or how was it that she had received this letter? She began to walk slowly, aimlessly, repeating to herself, "St. Blaise. St. Blaise . . ." Then the thought struck her that perhaps she was too late and that Gervais was dead. She began to run, as she had run to him the night after Borodino, filled with fearful forebodings. The sabots clopped along like horses' hoofs on the stones, and the damp cinders rose again, and the bitter smoke. Suddenly the light of the world had gone out. Everything was bitter and black, and turned to ashes. . . . The soldiers

lounging about the street corners, or playing lotto on the stones, looked at her queerly as she went by. They took her for a poor crazed woman, looking for a child that was lost.

II

The Hospital of St. Blaise was hidden away behind a church of the same name. It had been built for, perhaps, a hundred patients, and it held three hundred. It was the same with the hospitals all over the town, and still there were wounded waiting to be accommodated. Gervais lay in a long, low room on the ground floor. The river Moskwa flowed past the left wall, and permanent damp patches, growing a kind of fungus, ornamented that side. The walls had once been white. They were now splashed with blood, scrawled with charcoal, smoked black in a vain attempt to warm the room. The roof was so low that by raising one's legs on the bed one could touch the ceiling with one's toes. Gervais had not convalesced to that stage yet. He lay all day in a coma. He had come to, once quite clearly, but the smell of sweet rottenness in the room, the pails of nauseating lumps of flesh, the blood, the groanings, the wild shrieks, had been too much for him. Willingly he sank back into the half-dozing state, letting the horror and filth fade away from him like an evil dream. He could almost feel him-

self receding from it, as if a hand had been stretched out, and was drawing him away, up, up into the blissful skies. The people below could call his name and beseech him as much as they liked. He had but to shut his eyes, and they vanished.

The boy was really passing through a very critical time. The actual sprain to his leg was nothing, but he had told Paul the truth when he said he didn't think he was meant to be a soldier. The irregularities and uncertainties of the campaign, the shock of the first sight of blood, had created between them a nervous strain which only needed the story about Julie to turn it into a breakdown. The medical staff couldn't understand the case, but wisely they let him be. When Julie was admitted she hardly knew him. The chestnut hair was so tousled and dusty, and his face rough with a week's growth of hair. She had to pick her way through the buckets and rags to reach his bedside. He lay with his eyes shut, his head fallen innocently to one side. Behind his head, his greatcoat did service for a pillow. The man in the next bed was sitting on the edge of it, nursing a blood-stained stump, roughly bandaged. He would pat the stump, and then run his hand over his face, in a dazed way. Once or twice he said, "Oh, dear . . ." so suddenly that Julie wheeled round to look at him. The sweat was

pouring off his face, dripping down on to his arm, splashing on to the floor. She murmured something pitiful, and he smiled apologetically.

"It hurts so," he explained. Something in his accent and bearing struck Julie.

"Are you an officer?" she said. He smiled again with difficulty.

"Not much," he said.

"Then why—?" she signalled to Gervais.

"Oh—that chap? Well, I believe he was so dirty when they found him they couldn't tell what he was, and when they'd brought him here they thought it best not to move him."

"Is he so very bad?"

"I dunno, he's queer."

Julie stood up defiantly.

"He must be moved to officers' quarters at once." The man with the stump looked at her.

"Officers' quarters are full up," he said. "I heard the doctor say so. If he wanted to go to officers' quarters, he should have got wounded in action, and not fallen off his horse, like a bloody sailor." Infinite contempt sounded in his voice. Julie turned from him angrily, and put her hand on Gervais' bed. It was a board, resting on two ottoman trunks. Tears of pity welled up into her eyes. She knelt suddenly by the bed and said his name beseechingly. Slowly he opened his eyes, astonishingly clear and blue and young, and looked past her, through her, fixing his gaze on

the scrap of sky to be seen through the low window.

"Don't you know me? I have come to you. I came as soon as I got your brother's note. It's Julie," she said, but the blue eyes never wavered, never turned to the kneeling girl. They were steadfast, staring at the sky, seeming to reflect the same remoteness, the same completeness. As far as Julie could see, he neither saw nor heard her. She went on, in broken phrases, timid, endearing words, stumbling explanations, murmuring his name at every pause, but the poor weak sounds she was making never roused him; like a bell, they merged into the other sounds in the room, the rustling of blankets, the heavy sighs, the sobbings, the "Oh, dears," of the man with the stump—and the smell of sweet rottenness triumphed over all, entombing the whole room. Julie rose from her knees, and went slowly to the door. Outside in the street a church bell tolled, sweet and clear, and a sudden vision of Sophia and Natalia, in their white frocks, came with the sound. She turned homewards. All that was good and lovely and beautiful beckoned her onward. All that was pitiful and filthy and ugly tugged her back. She felt that she carried the whole load of Gervais' pain and weariness as she went, and the odour of the room where he lay still clung about her skirts. He was pulling her back, his filth and pitiful condition, and need of her, was pulling her

back. She might be walking homeward to the Khovanskis, to that strange, new, artificial life of theirs that she had shared, so miraculously, for one week, but she felt as she went that the shadows of the campaign went too. She no longer lived in the golden age, she lived in 1812. She was no sister of Natalia and Sophia's, she was a vivandière, and her lover lay unconscious, and she could do nothing for him.

Back in the hospital, Gervais had closed his eyes. Through the dusty lashes the tears trickled slowly, slowly, and he was too tired to stop them. Perhaps he would die soon. He longed to die. He tried to pray: "Our Father, which art in Heaven, let me die before we leave Moscow, let me die before the campaign starts again," but at every word a dead man, killed in battle, rose up and jeered at him. A procession of dead men, horribly mutilated, calling, "Coward! Coward!" The tears were too much for him, and he opened his eyes again, fixing them fearfully on that other blue outside. "Our Father which art in Heaven, if that is Heaven, take me there, deliver me from my tomentors," and the tears streamed down his face, under his chin, while he lay staring at the sky.

12

"DEAR PAUL,

"Gervais has written three times since he left home, and Maman is getting anxious to have a

letter from you. She is afraid that you have quite forgotten her, in all the excitements of conquering Russia. Mélanie d'Aubac was here the other day, and inquiring after you. She told me to send her love, and remind you of that evening in the haystack! She says that she is quite sure you are going to come back covered in medals! The weather here has been awful lately; nothing but rain, rain, rain! The vine on the west porch is suffering dreadfully. Can you remember what year it was we had it put in? Last year we only got forty-five bunches from it. That is very poor, but we can't afford to get a new one, as things stand at present. Tell Gervais that we found out that the stable-boy *did* take those breeches. There were I don't know how many tears and protestations about it, but Maman was firm, and dismissed him without a character. Of course, if either you or Gervais had been at home, you might have taken a stick to him, and that would have been sufficient, but there is nobody here strong enough to administer corporal punishment! The news of the campaign continues good, but I wish you could get those brutes to fight. What cowards they must be, retreating all the time! We have the prettiest little calf, born only yesterday. I have called it 'Moscow.' Maman says to remind you not to get overheated, and to give her love to Gervais, and thank him for his last letter. He says very little about himself, or you, but we

suppose you are both well. Write when you get a moment, and bring me something nice home.

"With love,

"Your affectionate sister,

"BABA ST. SIRIAC."

"That's good! I say, Bonnet, I'm not to get overheated. Don't you call that solicitous?"

"Damn solicitous! Who is it? Your sweetheart?"

"No-o! My sister."

"Oh, your sister . . . what's she like? Is she pretty?"

"So-so. I shouldn't care to marry her myself," Paul yawned.

"Who said anything about marrying her?"

"Well, you wouldn't do anything else to her. She's my sister; but 'overheated' is good." He rose in a leisurely way, stretched, and went over to the window. The Dragoons were barracked on the outskirts of the town, in an empty country house. As Paul leant on the sill, narrowing his eyes, he could see what looked like a thousand tiny bonfires burning all over the city. Here and there the flames were higher than the smoke, licking up the sides of buildings, lazily, almost casually, as if they were a permanent part of the landscape. Paul groaned. "Will this beastly fire never go out?"

Bonnet, engaged on a map, drawled: "I

shouldn't think so. We can't deal with it without fire-engines, and the cunning beggars took care to hide them."

"What I want to know is, who started it?" said another.

"Yes, we'd give our front teeth to know that, but we'll never find out," said Bonnet.

"I can tell you," said a brother officer, so thin and eager-looking that he seemed to have a flame burning inside him himself. "It's our soldiers. The discipline has gone to pieces. Only yesterday the Emperor—"

"Oh, *can* it!" from the others.

He stopped, pained. "I'm only telling you what the Emperor—"

"Yes. We know. The Emperor's morning prayer. 'Be good, little boys, and you'll never go to Hell.' Well, it's hot as hell here, anyway!"

The eager-looking man thumped on the table.

"Pay attention," he said. "You don't take this war seriously. To me every campaign gives one an opportunity for advancement. I study it from all angles. I learn its mistakes. Well, the mistake of this one is insufficient discipline."

Bonnet groaned in mock horror: "If you call shooting and hanging discipline, we've got the best discipline here we've ever had!"

"Oh, that's incendiaries," said the other, brushing them aside. "What I mean is our own men. The sentries don't challenge any more, d'you

realise that? All sorts of people, spies and everything, are passing in and out of the gates as they like."

"You can't blame the men," said an older man. "It's the unsettling effect of the fire. One never knows where it's going to spring up next. Two German bridge-builders were burnt as they slept last night."

"Well, who can't spare German bridge-builders? If you ask me, it's the internationalism of this campaign that's upset things. It's all right in peace, but it doesn't do in war. Look what our chaps are capable of, on their own. The minute we tack on with lunatic Westphalians, and drunken Italians, and—and all the others, the whole show goes to pot."

"What do you mean 'goes to pot'? We're in the town we set out to conquer, aren't we?"

"Ye-es, but is it conquered? We've set up the eagle standard in the Kremlin, we've looted the town, we've driven out the Russian authorities. We've made a 'new boundary of the French Empire'—isn't that how it runs?—but the atmosphere isn't conquered, and it seems to be influencing us. Perhaps it's the smoke that fogs up our minds. One thing is certain, we don't know what to do next." A silence greeted this statement, then somebody said:

"Well, I heard that the Emperor was waiting

to hear from the Czar. . . . Isn't that so?" Another pause, then the older man replied:

"He will never hear. That's the uncanny part of this country. I've fought in Spain and Egypt, but for pure uncanniness this country beats all. It's more Eastern and enigmatic than the East. Its plains are more cruel than the desert. It does nothing, nothing . . . anywhere else this campaign would have been a blazing victory. . . . Here—" he paused, impressively. One of the younger men laughed. "Here it's a blazing bonfire? Is that what you mean?" But the laughter which sounded was uncomfortable laughter.

Paul lounged across the room, pausing by Bonnet intent over his map.

"I'm off to see how Gervais is getting on. Coming?"

"Sorry. I promised old pigeon-toes I'd get this done by to-morrow."

"All right. So long." He went out, closing the door.

He was really worried about Gervais, and detested the necessity of keeping him in his present surroundings. His horse picked its way nervously over the smoking roads into the city. Here whole houses had fallen down, leaving one wall sticking up, like a decayed tooth, black and jagged. Here a school-house was ablaze, the children herded into the road, looking on sullenly. Here a Jewish

congregation bewailed its lot. They had taken all their valuables for safety to the synagogue, and the synagogue had been burnt down in the night. Here a group of soldiers were recording the story of how one of their captains had gone, with another, to choose a coach to travel home in. They had discussed the wheels and springs and fittings quite amicably with the owner of the shop, and he had seemed to understand quite perfectly that it was all the fortune of war that he should give instead of sell his goods. Yet, the minute the two captains had left the shop, the crowd had seen him deliberately set fire to the straw, so that he lost everything, instead of only a coach. Yes, the fire roused strange flames in the hearts of men.

At St. Blaise's Hospital they told Paul that his brother had been removed. A Russian family had taken him in, Khovanski by name, and had promised to look after him well. When pressed for further particulars, they were vague. They had been thankful, in their terribly overcrowded condition, to see the last of him. The vivandière might be able to tell him more. She seemed to know them well. Paul wheeled his horse round to go homewards. So the little girl had turned up trumps after all! He felt pleased, elated, at the success of his plan. Surely it might be counted to wipe out the unfortunate episode before, which Gervais had taken so much to heart. Anyhow, he could trust that Gervais was in good hands.

She was certainly fond of him. He began to whistle softly to himself, remembering the letter from Baba, and trying to recall the year when the vine on the west porch was planted.

13

Gervais had asked to be taken to heaven, and it was heaven that he lay in now. He was firmly convinced, the next morning when he woke up, that he had died, and when he saw Natalia bringing in the coffee, and treading lightly not to wake him, he thought Gabriel was bringing him holy water. The whole room was lofty and light, and wistaria climbing in at the windows filled the room with scent. The sheet under his chin was soft as silk. Doves were cooing in the garden. He still felt weak, but his leg no longer hurt, and he had nothing to do but lie and rest, and look at the blue sky. . . . When he woke up again, the coffee had vanished, but grapes had been placed by his bed. He reached out his hand, and touched them, unbelieving. They were very corporeal grapes. He ate three, then lay back, revelling in the softness of the bed, and letting his eyes wander lazily over the room. Immediately facing him on the wall were three pictures worked in silk, country scenes, of corn and cows and wood-cutting. On another wall hung a portrait of a dark, tall, handsome man, with flashing eyes and a great beard, a true Khovanski. Yes, he became more and more

convinced that though this seemed to be heaven, it was only a heavenly imitation of it. A timid sound at the door made him turn his head. It was the angel Gabriel again, with a blue sash round his middle and a very feminine form.

"Are you awake?" Natalia said. Gervais began to say "Yes," and to prepare a stumbling speech, but she flitted into the room, her finger on her lips. "Hush . . . you are not to speak. You have been very ill and we brought you here to take care of you. Is there anything that you would like? How do you feel? Are you warm enough? Shall I close the window? Did I disturb you when I came in?"

"To whom have I the—"

"My name is Natalia Khovanski, and you are our enemy. We are doing this to show you what stuff the Khovanskis are made of."

Gervais gasped, admiringly. He didn't know what stuff the Khovanskis were made of, but he wanted to say that if it was the same stuff as their sheets, it must be very fine stuff indeed. Natalia was close to him, and bending over him. She had the whitest neck and breast, like a dove, like an angel. He would like to have touched it, as he touched the bloom on the grapes. Instead he said weakly:

"I should be glad to know how I got here."

"We brought you in a coach. You were all dirty and huddled up. You aren't very clean

now." She made a little face. "Is there anything you would like to eat?"

"No . . ."

"Not even a little omelette?"

"Can Russians make omelettes?" He was ashamed of his silly voice, it sounded so small. She laughed like a bell, and said: "No—but Julie can!" and at the words Julie came round the door. She had taken off the jacket, and was in the white blouse and grey shirt. The blackish-red hair was brushed neatly back, and tied like a soldier's hair. She looked solid, she looked what she was—vivandière. He turned his eyes from her, gratefully, to the small, ethereal figure in white.

"I don't want anything to eat at all," he said. The vision of Julie had filled his mind with muddling thoughts again, things he didn't want to be reminded of. He wished she would go away, and leave the other one here for him to look at. Even as he looked, the white figure became blurred, and vanished. He became oblivious of everything, except sleep.

14

Three days later Gervais had reached the stage where he could distinguish between the different members of the family: Madame, who came to call on him in the mornings, and wept when she told him of her son; Sophia, flitting in and out like a butterfly, bubbling with silver laughter, and

cheeky imitations of the others; Natalia, golden and white and restful, Natalia whose cool hand smoothed his brow and straightened the sheets, Natalia whose tiny voice rippled on, like water over pebbles in a mountain valley, when she read to him; Marfa, the incredibly old Marfa, with her mumbling Russian, pulling the blinds at night; and, in the background, Julie, reminding him always of things he wanted to forget (not by saying anything, indeed he didn't think he had heard her utter a word since he had been there) but by simply being there. He had discovered, too, that it was through Julie that he was taken there, and debts of gratitude were not in Gervais' line.

As for Julie, she was completely puzzled by his attitude. He could talk and smile with Natalia, why could he not talk and smile with her? The last time they had been together, on that hill, he had sworn that he would come to her in Moscow. . . . Well, she gave the riddle up. He had been like this once before, over the affair of the crucifix. He would come all right again. Meanwhile, she rejoiced in his rapid recovery of health, in his childish enjoyment of clean and pretty things, and in his appreciation of the Khovanski family. That very day he had demanded a bath, and there had been great scurryings to and fro, and much carrying of hot water and towels and soap. He was still rather weak, so, leaning on Marfa

and Natalia, he had been taken to the room where the bath was, and had sworn he could manage alone. Much to his discomfiture, no sooner was he in the bath, stretching his toes in a kind of shivering enjoyment of the steamy warmth, than Marfa had advanced upon him like a Fate, with a scrubbing-brush in her hand, and something like laughter in her sunken eyes.

She had scrubbed him with a will, until the bath was full of foam, and once he had overcome his embarrassment, he rather enjoyed it. Afterwards his chestnut hair shone again like ribbon, and the one last thing left was to shave. Paul had found the address of the Khovanskis, and the day before had left a clean uniform for him, so that afternoon found him spick and span, pleasantly exhausted, listening with a mock solemnity to Russian fairy tales, told by Natalia. At last they were finished. Natalia sat in the window-seat, swinging her feet, the late afternoon sun surrounding her with a nimbus. Her eyes were cast down. Gervais said, "A penny for your thoughts," but she only sighed and shook her head, so that the pale hair stood up more than ever. Very slowly Gervais crossed the room. He took up the end of one of her blue ribbons, and stood playing with it. A silence fell between them, full of intimacy. Presently she said:

"And will you marry Julie?"

The five words shocked Gervais terribly. He

made no answer for a minute, then he said: "What makes you ask that?"

"Because she loves you, and you love her. That was why we had you here, because we thought that, though you were French, you must be a nice man, to love Julie. She is a princess."

Gervais said, very low: "It is your sweet nature which prompts you to say that, Natalia. She is not a princess, in France."

Natalia answered quickly: "Ah—you mean by birth, but Julie is a princess by instinct. Surely you can see that?"

"Ye-es," said Gervais. "I see what you mean, but instinct doesn't count for very much." He smiled. "I should like to see my mother's face if I brought home Julie for a bride," he said.

They laughed together at the hidden meaning of what they said, both with a guiltiness; then they stopped, and talked no more, and Gervais went on playing with the blue ribbon, and Natalia went on looking at the bent brown head. They were like two children playing on the edge of a precipice, and they knew it, but they went on playing there. Each searched the other's thoughts, the other's eyes, each sent a message thrilling home to the heart of the other, "I love you, I love you," and each thought the secret well kept. Suddenly Natalia stood up. "Julie is a princess," she said, "and you know it!" and ran from the room.

The Princess was busy washing Gervais' handkerchiefs and dirty linen. She sang as she washed. She was looking after Gervais, he was getting well, and he admired her precious Natalia. Could anybody's cup of joy be fuller? She was proud of him, too, in his clean clothes, and she could see that the Khovanskis were impressed. If only things could stay like this for ever and ever! She kissed the cuffs of the shirt as she hung it on the line, because his hands had been there, and a small black cloud crossed the sky, making a black shadow on the shirt. . . .

That cloud was the first break in the fine weather; the heat changed from a pleasant warmth to an oppressive airlessness. As the cantiniers had prophesied, there was thunder in the air. The atmosphere affected Natalia as it affected the flowers, sapping her vitality. She became peevish and restless. She snapped at Sophia and Julie, and was inclined more than ever to sudden mirth and sudden tears. Marfa was worried for her child, and tried to dose her, but was snarled at for her pains. Sophia was depressed and wept continually. Julie hid whatever she might feel under a stolid exterior. Madame kept continually to her bedroom. Since Gervais had arrived, he refused to allow any of them out into the streets, so that, being always together, they got on each other's nerves. The whole city was full of tension. It was known that the Em-

peror had sent a really handsome note to Alexander some time ago, and that he waited for an answer. The answer, as the captain of Dragoons prophesied, never came, and the black, foreboding clouds gathered on the horizon. What was worse, the fodder in the city had given out, and Murat had had to send the cavalry skirmishing over the countryside to extort hay from the peasants, for love or money. Several of these cavalrymen disappeared, and never came back. The rumour grew abroad that the Cossacks were responsible. Muskets, too long idle, were cleaned, swords were sharpened, accoutrements polished. Soldiers asked each other, "When are we going to get out of this?"—and still the waiting, and an added warning that any rash provocation of the other side would be punishable with death. There were still six thousand wounded in the city, a dangerous drag to a healthy army, and the soldiers' new boot-leather was given out so late that they had thrown away their first pairs, and had no uppers to fasten the soles to. A little thing, apparently, but one responsible for several thousand deaths. Every man, from the highest in authority to the drummer-boy, was weary of the long waiting and the armistice, and wanted to get away from the smokiness of the town to the clean plains. Meanwhile, they worked up a red-hot friction between themselves, and the horses went hungry.

It was on one of these hot, damp days, when the early morning mist never seemed to rise above the earth, that the climax came with Natalia. She had been much paler of late, and had refused ever to be alone with Gervais. Once or twice she had rushed at Julie, hugging her, and kissing her passionately, as if to beg forgiveness for something she had done. One night, when she had undressed and gone to bed, she woke Sophia up in the middle of the night, and said that she was afraid, because whenever she was with him the whole world was a miracle. Gervais had been wretched because of her behaviour. He blamed himself for sins he had never committed, he tried to waylay her to get her to explain, but she would only lay her finger on her lips—as she had done the first endearing time that he had seen her—and slip through his fingers. She was elusive, yes, that was the word, elusive. . . . He tried to write a poem about her which began:

> "So swiftly is your promise done
> Elusive and Illusive One!
> So swiftly is the nimbus fled
> That aureoled your gracious head
> And Substance now is only air
> Rainbowed with an antique despair. . . ."

and couldn't get any further. At last he reached a stage where he could live no longer in the same house with her, and bear it. He was stuffing his clothes into a bag, when Natalia came in. She

had been crying quite recently, and was dressed again in the willowy black dress.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to barracks," very gruffly from Gervais.

"Oh. I'm sorry we couldn't make you comfortable here."

"Natalia! You know it's not—" but before he could complete the sentence, she had run to him, and flung her arms round his shoulders, burying her face in his breast and sobbing, said: "Oh, love her! Love her! You must love her!"

"Love whom?"

"Julie! She loves you. . . . I should never have taken any notice of you! It is her that you belong to," and she wept. Holding her, shaking, to him, Gervais blessed and cursed the unfortunate Julie alternately. He lifted Natalia up, and carried her across to the window-seat. There he set her down. He kissed her hands, and each finger on her hands, and her brow, and, trembling, her mouth. The odour of lilac surrounded him. Half crying, half smiling, through her tears, Natalia sat there. She seemed more precious, more human, at that moment than ever before. She tried again: "Julie—"

"Hush! Don't let's talk of Julie . . ."

"My darling Gervais! But she loves you!"

"And I love you. Is that clear enough?"

"Gervais, your eyes are bluer than anything

I have ever seen! . . . But what will Julie say?"

"She must say what she likes. It is you that I live for. It is you that brought me back to health! Natalia, promise me you will come with me to France?"

"I won't promise anything. I am a Khovanski. But you must marry Julie." He was hurt at her insistence. He tried again, very gently.

"Darling, you don't understand. It's one of the attractive things about you Russian people. You think that if a person's nice, well, that's enough. In France, if a person's nice, it's a step in the right direction, but it's very far from being enough."

"You mean that Julie—"

"I think that Julie has been exaggerating, if she says that I ever loved her. I got her a job in the army, and she's grateful to me, that's all. After all, she's a vivandière. Vivandières don't usually have anything to do with officers. My colonel wouldn't be too pleased if he found out."

"Found out what?"

"Well, the way in which Julie and I know each other. It's too intimate by half. If I'd had more thought, I shouldn't have slipped into so close an association, but these things come on you before you know where you are."

"But Julie—"

"Hush! That's enough about Julie. Tell me about Natalia now. Tell me what you were like

when you were a little girl." So, willingly on his part, half reluctantly on hers, they shut out everything but love, and the present time. They would not think of the time to come, the probable separation, the difficulties in the way. They kissed, and the world melted away. The thought of Julie, gratitude to Julie, which had been struggling like a caged bird in Natalia's heart, ceased to beat its wings, sank down, lifeless. The sun flooded the room in a last despairing flicker, surrounded the two figures in each other's arms, and, just as the golden touch of Midas made everything gold and still, so the sun, painting each separate object in the room, seemed, at the time, to suck away the life from them, leaving them mere shells of things and people. The very dust, which had been dancing in a shaft of light, seemed suddenly to hang, like so many delicate-winged flies, in an invisible web, still, impossibly still, just as Gervais and Natalia were impossibly still, for living people. Their shadows lay across the floor, as if they had been there since the beginning of the world. A wistaria petal knocked against the window restlessly, as if to warn them, to draw them back to the life of the world outside, but they were deaf, and blind, and dumb. . . .

Julie, passing the door, saw the bag lying opened, the clothes half in and half out, and came in to find the reason. She was barefoot, because sabots were awkward for wearing in the house,

and she made no sound. The sun leapt at her too, and cast his spell over her, striking her immobile for a moment. Then, as noiselessly as she had come, she withdrew.

A crude animal rage seized her, filling her from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet. Instead of a heart, a thudding destructive engine began beating inside her, directing her whole body, moving her arms and legs like pistons, mechanically. Her eyes were wide open as she moved down the corridor, but she saw nothing but Gervais and Natalia, mirrored in mirrors, for ever and ever. They surrounded her, standing locked in each other's arms, they almost blocked her path. Up above her, they swam over her head like cherubs. Below her, she trampled over their inert, unheeding bodies. The images closed in upon her, compressing her, so that she raised her arms as if to push them off. She could almost feel the warmth of Gervais' breath over Natalia's shoulder, and the sweet summery scent of lilac enveloping them both. The salt taste of blood filled her mouth, from her bitten lips. She tasted it meditatively as she walked, as a tigress first tasting human blood. Once again instinct guided her, as it had guided her to go to Gervais after Borodino. But that had been the homing instinct of a bird that considers no storms, no dangers, nothing great enough to stop it in its flight. This was a new instinct, this thudding engine in place

of her heart directed it, filling her veins with hatred, surging and singing in her ears, "Kill! Kill!"

When she reached the end of the corridor she stood, swinging her head slowly from one side to another, as a tigress does, staring through dulled, veiled, wicked eyes, tasting the blood thoughtfully, pressing her hands against the thudding engine in her breast. The window before her overlooked the quarter of the town where the fire was still smouldering. The voice in her ears said, "Burn!" so clearly that she heard the sharp crackling of flames in the word. She stopped the sideways motion of her head, and began to nod slowly, still looking out of the window with dulled eyes. Then, as a machine is set rapidly in motion, Julie was set in motion. She sped down the stairs, along the lower corridor, to the great stove between the kitchen and the store-room, thrust in a twisted wad of paper, and ran out into the garden with it flaming like a torch. The house was made of wood, in common with the rest of the town, and the dry herbs planted below the windows took the flame gratefully, until a dozen little bonfires were alight around the house. The thin planks, laid one on top of the other as the outer covering of the walls, had warped outward under the intense heat, and the first investigating flames poked long red fingers between the boards, scorching the edges, shrivelling off loose splinters, sending puffs

of thick blue smoke out between the crevices, chuckling and cackling as the tortured wood protested. Then the white paint began to bubble on the windows, and the lead of the panes ran down the glass like heavy tears. Julie watched it all carefully, relighting places where the fire had petered out, fanning the first flickers with her skirt. Marfa, born and bred to the danger and possibility of fire, had heard the first crackling, and hurried out. Feebly she was trying to pull Julie back, but the girl was like iron, heedless, insensate. Now Marfa called to Sophia and Natalia, and Madame, wringing her old, old hands, beating her forehead, and the fire leapt up like a scarlet flower, peering in round the windows, blossoming suddenly all over the walls. Julie heard nothing, saw nothing but the flames. The violent engine in her heart had ceased thudding so loudly, as if its work was done. Julie began to sing to herself as she watched:

"Burn, Moscow, burn! Burn, Russians, burn! The hatred in my heart has set your house alight. My treacherous flames shall burn your treacherous bodies! I will climb, with my flames, I will climb to the skies. I will breathe down fire from the skies, and scorch Russia black! I will burn Madame, and I will burn Sophia, and I will burn Natalia, and I will burn Gervais, and I shall not hear their shrieks and cries, because my flames sing more loudly than they do! Nothing is worth

anything any more in the world. I will burn the world. I will set the whole world flaming, and spinning back to the sun until it is a cinder, an ash in Space. I am the fire that set Moscow alight, I am the incendiary!" And when her imagination failed her, she went on humming to herself, her hands on her hips, her legs apart, rocking and laughing.

Marfa had re-entered the house, and roused Madame Khovanski (who was out in the garden in her dressing-gown) and then gone farther in to find the others. Sophia, half asleep, had been sent packing from her bedroom, but once outside, had cried to go back for her new shoes. Marfa had gone for her. Julie went on singing: "Ah, my darling flames, my children! Climb up, and tear down the walls, strip the house bare, and show me my two friends! Show me my sister Natalia, darling flames, show me my lover Gervais! Hold them in your embrace as closely as they hold each other. Give them a wedding of fire!" And the flames, as if in obedience to her, leapt up and down the walls, licking them with long red tongues, peeling the planks back as if they were nothing more than the ripe black skins of a banana. The window-panes were splintering out now, and the glass gleamed vividly in the red light. Drifting black ashes sailed vaguely to and fro in the air. Julie was snuffing the smoke into her nostrils as if it were some delicious scent.

She didn't see Gervais, carrying Natalia, stagger out through the doorway, wreathed in fire. Sophia and Madame Khovanski ran up to him, bending over her as he laid her down under the pear tree. The fire was well away now, and the noise was like the roaring of great breakers. The flames themselves were surging up like breakers, meeting each other on the other side of the gaping roof, crashing together with red sparks and bubbles of black smoke, flinging themselves back again, and dividing into a thousand snakes' tongues. Outside in the road a small, stolid crowd of loiterers had gathered—a few children, some French soldiers betting on the probable collapse of a room, a peasant with an ox-cart. . . . Not one of them had the absorbed look of the usual watcher at a fire. They were casual, almost bored. The neighbours on either side, who had returned to their houses during the past week, were flinging buckets of water over the nearest walls, as if the act were as usual as getting breakfast. . . . And still Julie stood there, and sang, and nobody dare approach her. The firelight transformed her into a terra-cotta statue, glowing, dangerous, triumphant. . . .

The fire was at its height for three full hours, then it began to abate. Natalia, who had been overcome by the smoke, had recovered consciousness under the loving ministrations of Gervais. Madame Khovanski, a shawl over her head like

a peasant woman, was watching her house burn with all the impersonal interest of a spectator. Sophia was fretful, a little frightened, and annoyed with Marfa for not having returned yet with her new shoes. . . . And Julie still stood, glorying in the uproar of the fire, with her back to them all. . . .

As the flames sank down, so her spirits sank down. It was as if all her rage had found vent in the fire, and now sank, abated, exhausted, as the flames sank, leaving behind the dwarfed skeleton of a house. The unnatural warmth disappeared, a chilly dampness took its place. Julie shivered, and stretched, like a sleeper awakening. She opened her eyes wide, and suddenly saw that the house of Beauty and Love, the house that had taken her in, and given her both these things, was nothing now but black timber and ashes. She turned round and saw the Khovanski family under the pear tree, watching her, and Gervais kneeling by Natalia. She ran to them.

"Is she dead?" she asked fearfully. Natalia was very pale, very small. A black smudge on her chin rebuked Julie more fearfully than the wrath of God. Her beautiful white angel, soiled, and perhaps dead of shock! Gervais shook his head. He couldn't trust himself to speak. Julie turned round to Madame Khovanski and Sophia. They were staring at the place where their house had been. They stood proudly, facing the ruins

of their home, and a vision flashed through Julie's mind of what a French family would do under the same circumstances, the wailings, the weepings, the runnings to and fro. And the contrast broke her heart. She stumbled up to where Madame Khovanski stood, and fell on her knees. The woman never looked down. At that moment she seemed altogether admirable to Julie. All the trivialities, the foolish bickerings, fell away. This was the real Russian, bearing loss with tranquillity, making something beautiful even of distress. She could think of no words abject enough to explain her inexplicable actions, to someone so immeasurably above all emotion. Julie picked up the hem of Madame Khovanski's skirt and kissed it. Perhaps the theatrical action touched her. She bent down, putting her hand on the kneeling girl's head.

"Kill me. Burn me, too! It was I who burnt your beautiful house!" Julie said.

"Hush! Hush!"

"But you don't understand. I made the fire! I am the incendiary!"

Madame Khovanski drew herself up still more proudly.

"You, a Frenchwoman, how can you make fire?" she said, then sighing, almost to herself, she added, "It is our heritage. . . ." Sophia echoed her, "It had to be. It is our heritage." And still they stood there, thoughtfully, unable to leave

the scene of disaster. The smoke streamed up into the sky as if it had always known the way, mingling in the upper air with a thousand other smokes, hanging like a haze over the city. Julie felt as weary, as completely burned out, as the dying fire. She crawled across to the place where Natalia lay, across Gervais' knees. She ignored Gervais, gazing with a pitiful intensity on the small, pale face beneath her. The long lashes fluttered, and looking up at Julie, Natalia smiled. Here and there, in the amazing fair hair, black ashes clung.

"I thought you were dead," Julie said, seizing her two hands, and kissing them. The weary, heavy-lidded eyes smiled again before they closed.

"Not yet, Batushka," she said, and turned in Gervais' arms, so that she lay against his breast. So had Julie lain in his arms, after Borodino. He had held her in the same careful way, and stroked her hair in the same way. He was looking at her defiantly now, as if he knew she was thinking just those things. Yet he was afraid of this vivandière, with her sudden gusty changes of thought and action. He was half afraid now, as she stretched her hand to Natalia, that she was going to do some harm to her. Instead, she stroked the little hand resting against the lapel of Gervais' coat.

"Take care of her, my lieutenant," she said.

15

"*October* 12.

"DEAR BERNARD,

"Can you take over for me this week-end? There isn't a frightful lot of work, and I'd be eternally grateful. The truth is, I'm having the devil of a time here, and don't feel like leaving just at present. These Russian girls think we're the goods, and load us with all sorts of favours, and they're hot stuff, I can tell you! I'm just lying out in the garden all day, having drinks brought to me every half-hour, and telling them tales of Gay Paree while they sit round, enthralled. They think we all come from Paris. Joke, isn't it? By the way, if you can't manage it, see if Gigot will do it. I took a week-end for him once, and he never paid me back for the saddle. All you've got to do, if you will, is stagger around to the men's mess once a day, cast your eye over it, and mark O.K. on the report-sheet. Bones will come to you in the mornings if there are any complaints to be dealt with, or any defaulters. Personally, there are so many of both, that I simply don't give the severe penalties. Half the chaps don't go back to barracks at night. I can't think where they get to, and they're always setting up a yap of some sort about the food, or the rum, or the lack of fodder. Did you hear

what happened to poor old Harry? General Murat sent him out on one of those bloody foraging expeditions, and he got separated from the rest. The Cossacks found him, and sent him home strapped to his horse's belly, and badly cut up. I call it abominable. Another thing, while you are at the men's place, you might apply some of that masterly stuff of yours, you know, Honour of the Regiment and what not. Whenever I start on it, I always want to giggle. Though, mind you, the honour of the jolly old Regiment is safe enough with me. What I mean is, when I poke my nose into their stinking sleeping accommodation, there's always a bit of a skirt just being whisked out of sight. I pretend not to see, but I know what goes on. Last week they gave a kind of party, got two Russian laundresses, stripped 'em, and dressed them up as French Marquises, only they had to use suet and flour on their heads, to get the powdered effect! I mean, it's funny enough, but a joke's a joke. Another thing is the wages sheet, which you might run your eye over, and initial. If you feel specially energetic, inquire more closely into the Sundries. It gets bigger and bigger each week, but if I say anything the only reply is a long-drawn moan from the Sergeant, and the usual question, 'When are we going to clear out of this God-damn country, sir?' I think that's all. Of course, if the Armistice is broken, or anything, I'll be back like a shot, only I do feel

I've had more than enough of it, lately, what with the uncertainty, and the bad water-supply. Send me a yelp if you need my help. How's the bonfire, still blazing away?

"LOUIS."

"MY DEAREST WIFE,

"We are still in Moscow, as you will see by the address. We all hope that the next order will be 'About turn.' The weather is still nice and sunny. I think often of you and Grethe, and my baby. You have never written to me, but I know you are very busy and not fond of writing. It seems a good many years since I have seen my dear wife. Is the mother still with you? Tell Grethe I am bringing her a beautiful trinket-case. I pray often that I may see you, but I do not know when it will be.

"Your loving husband,

"GUSTAV."

"DEAR MOTHER,

"Please don't send me any more warm clothes. All the other boys are laughing at me. It isn't cold, and I believe all we have heard about Russia being cold is only a lie like all their other stories. I am getting Marie to write this for me as usual. She says you haven't any need to worry about me with her, because she is fifty-six and lost all her teeth. We have had a good time here with the fires. I've got ten blisters on one hand, so I don't

know how I'll manage with the drum-sticks when we get going again. We don't know where we're going next—perhaps to Palestine. The Emperor says he may as well conquer the rest of the East while he's here. My mark won't be very good to-day, because of the blisters. Love from

"X."

16

The Emperor of France gave the Czar of Russia until October the 18th in which to reply to his friendly overtures. On October the 18th no reply came, and the order for evacuating the city was given. The Grand Army rose, and stretched itself, yawning. For some days past the machinery for active service had been put in motion. Hasty arrangements had been made for the wounded and dying, marching rations had been given out, and two thousand more horses had been commandeered. The harassed officials ran about tearing their hair. All very well to order horses, but horses don't grow on trees, and why more horses when there wasn't enough fodder to feed those they had? Fortunately the evacuation had quite an excuse, for the armistice had been broken shortly before, nobody quite knew how. Some said Murat, harassed beyond endurance, had fired on the Cossack skirmishers. Some said that the Cossack skirmishers had shot one of Murat's sentries. Some said—but very few—that a Russian peasant out shooting in the woods had fired

at a rabbit, and wounded a Frenchman. Whatever the reason, the fact remained that the armistice was broken, and everybody could jolly well look out!

As the soldiers prepared for the long march, they whistled cheerily. They hadn't yet heard where they were going, but some instinct told them they were homeward bound. Tenderly they packed the little souvenirs for the children, tenderly they bade their clinging loves farewell. When the pocket accommodation gave out, they hung their own persons about with loot, gold necklaces round brawny necks, fur tippets over the necklaces, delicately-woven gloves tucked into dirty boots, muffs worn as hats, gilt sandals dangling from their belts, priceless Chinese mandarin coats and shawls over torn shirts, a curved Cossack sword, a friend's musket, a carved drinking flask, tied on with bits of yarn. When they lined up, they looked like scarecrows in purple and fine linen. Their condition was poor, for their meals had been irregular and the close, muggy air had taken the tan off their faces. Some were suffering from a kind of fever, not bad enough to incapacitate them, but catching. Some were so weighted down with costly ikons taken from churches, and gilded altar-pieces, that it was as much as they could do to stand, let alone move. Others, looking absurdly thin amongst their bulkily clothed companions, clasped a hidden pocket, looking

round with furtive eyes. Others frankly hung themselves with bottles, and loaded their horses with them. One man had a wheelbarrow filled with bales of silk and striped muslins and taffetas. Every kind of costly encumbrance in the way of furniture, candlesticks, and carpets, was being taken along. The cantiniers and vivandiers were the same, having loaded their mules and wagons with stuffs and metals. Had not the Emperor himself directed the melting down of two hundredweight of gold and six tons of silver into bullion for France? Had he not taken as trophies the Arms of Moscow, the Eagle from the gates of St. Nicholas, and the great Cross from the church of John the Great? With so eminent an example before them, who could fail to profit by it?

At dawn, on the nineteenth, that strange caravan moved forward, as cumbrous, as magnificently gaudy, as irregular in formation and costume, as any Eastern band. Was this the famous Grand Army, renowned for its discipline, returning from a glorious conquest? As they lumbered out in the dusky light, they resembled rather a beaten band of irregulars, slinking out of an unconquered city. The step was hurried, apprehensive. The horses pulled against each other, the musicians who should have been playing were much too occupied with other things. Companies, unable to keep tally of their men, mingled with other companies. Odd, unattached groups of men, unable to find

horses, were dragging wagons themselves. And in between, hampering the mounted soldiers, and hastening the infantry into a trot, were numerous, nameless carriages, wagons, barouches, and sledges, covered and uncovered, filled and overflowing to the axles with plunder. The officers themselves, trotting up and down the line in a vain attempt to restore a shadow of order, were clad in expensive furs and silks. Or else they hid themselves in the carriages, laughing and drinking with the women refugees, Russian and French, tossing the empty glasses out of the window, to cut the bare feet of the infantry. Like a roaring, tumbling torrent, they poured out of the city, in sudden spurts and dashes, in a long, thin trickling, in an overflowing crush. Everywhere, in the creaking wheels, the whining gun-carriages, the beat of the horses' hoofs, the pad-pad of the bare feet, the same thought ran, the same song was sung, "Hurry! Hurry!" They had entered Moscow and found it thriving and peaceful. They left it desolate, starved, plundered, blackened, and burnt. And their feet hurried as they ran from their conquest. . . .

And towards the end of that winding procession came the camp-followers, with their wagons, and Julie, on Rousseau, among them. Close behind the camp-followers were more wagons and barouches, and among them was a battered black carriage, drawn by one old horse, which contained

the Khovanski family. Like so many others, they had lost everything in the occupation, and saw nothing better now than to follow the destroyers. Except that Natalia didn't think of Gervais as a destroyer. Since the night of the fire they had been formally betrothed. Now Gervais was taking her home to Versailles for the marriage, and her mother and sister were coming too. All three were laughing and joking, filled with innocent excitement, peering through the windows at the motley soldiers and clapping their hands. Then the two girls turned and knelt on the seat to see the last of their beloved city, and they cried a little, for their brother and for their home, and even for Marfa, burned so unfortunately in the fire. Then they remembered Gervais, and his charming brother, and Julie, and the fun they would have seeing the sights of Paris, and they laughed again, almost before the tears were dry on their cheeks.

Gervais, plodding along between Brigette and Paul, felt a curious content. He was thinking what a lot he had learnt since the beginning of the campaign, and, every now and then, of Natalia and her beauty. He was pleased, too, that Paul approved of the family, and felt no apprehension about his mother's opinion. Anyhow, the house was big enough to hold them all. Thinking about his home, he grew suddenly homesick, and the touch of his hand on the reins made the horse quicken its step. Paul reached out for the bridle:

"Hi—not so fast, sonny! We can't do it in a day!"

Gervais turned to him.

"I have a feeling, Paul, that if we can't do it in a day, we shall be too late," he said. Paul looked at him closely.

"What's up, bridegroom? The grey goose walking over your grave?" And as he said it, laughing, the homesick feeling in Gervais faded away again, and he laughed with his brother, fixing his eyes on the winding column ahead.

Julie had felt that same apprehensiveness come over her too, but with her it did not go, it remained. She alone endured the heavy burden of responsibility. With an uncanny intuition and fear of the future, she thought of Gervais and Paul ahead, and sighed, and of Natalia and Sophia behind, and shuddered, and there was no one with her to remind her of her blessings, or share her fear.

Some soldiers behind had recognised Rousseau. They uttered the guttural, "Arré, Rousseau! Arré, vivandière!" And she turned to wave to them. The morning light was growing stronger every minute, and behind them she saw Moscow, under her smoke and ashes, grow up again into the enchanted city, filling the air with beauty. . . . Then the vision faded.

"Well, we're off, vivandière!"

"We're off, soldier!"

"Here's wishing us strong legs and strong hearts for the journey."

"You'll need them, soldier."

"Ah, you Mother Grumble, what a thing to say! I shall transfer my custom, if you're not careful!"

"I don't care what you do, so long as you lower that great bellow of yours; you've broken three of my cider-bottles already!" As she said the words, her accustomed stolidity returned, anchoring her tossing heart. And the morning light beat down on her strappings and the mule's back, and on the strappings and bayonets of the soldiers, and the Grand Army evacuated Moscow.

BOOK III

THE RETREAT FROM RUSSIA

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THE RETREAT FROM RUSSIA

I

TURNING their backs on Moscow, the overburdened army marched southwards, following the old Kaluga road. Progress was slow, for the cavalry and artillery horses were in the poorest condition, owing to lack of proper food. Several dropped within the first half-day, unused to the strain put on them. They were shot immediately, and the more valuable harness removed to save it from the Cossacks. The soldiers hid their fear under a general cloak of *bonhomie* and loud joking, but even as they hugged their loot to them, their eyes roved warily from side to side, suspicious of the most harmless shadow cast by a dancing leaf. It was not that their reputation for enormous bravery, born in blood and proved by it, was in any way untrue, but a brave man, clad in a stout pair of shoes, doesn't feel the same bravery going barefoot. Feet are susceptible; they suffer from dangers below, and above, and on either side. It is not pleasant, when marching along confidently, to tread in horse manure, nor is it restful to have

one's companion's rifle dropped heavily on to one's foot. Wheels of every sort assume absurd proportions under the same conditions, and sharp stones, flints, brass buttons, glass from carriage windows, jagged horseshoes, bottles, and rusty tools do not make for easy walking. The only alternative was to glue one's eyes on the road beneath, and chance being shot in the back from an ambush. From time to time an orderly galloped ahead, with the latest information from some marshal behind for the General, and from time to time the C.O. would trot up, jingling and jangling with both military and other equipment, exhorting the men to silence and order. All down the long line officers could be heard, keeping up their little song, varying the words ever so slightly, but always with the same opening bar: "Now, men!—" "Now, men!—" The men were tolerant, even slightly pitying, but they had not the slightest intention of keeping order and silence. They even looked rather puzzled as they turned their heads to their commanding officer, wrinkling up their swarthy faces, as if to say, "Order? Silence? He must be thinking of some other army, not of us." And they would wait till he was out of earshot before beginning the noise and careless step again.

Keeping as close as possible to these pirates came the cavalcade of coaches, calashes and barouches, three, four, six, and eight-wheeled

vehicles, drawn by oxen, Cossack ponies, mules, and old horses. The coachmen on the boxes trembled so violently with fear that the reins on the animals' backs kept up a perpetual tremor. If anyone remonstrated, they always retorted that they had a perfect right to be afraid, for any simpleton knew that the first thing to do to stop a coach was to shoot the coachman. Within the coaches all was laughter and song. Guitars filled the hurrying air with languorous, mocking music, and under the strain of the violent behaviour of those inside the old wheels creaked complainingly. Sometimes a one-horse sledge went by swiftly, its little black hood hiding everything inside but a white hand on the bearskin rug; or a clumsy, lumbering wagon, filled to overflowing with family, obstructed the path of the impatient, while Papa urged on the dull oxen with oaths and execrations: "Hurry, you old fools, or the Cossacks will get us!" And the oxen snorted and pulled, but never hastened their pace. Perhaps they knew that the Cossacks would get them anyway.

By the end of the first day, the Khovanski family were a little bored with their journey. The romance of the beginning had worn off, and they were stiff and cramped. Besides, the old blackened leather smelt abominably. They had spent the morning trying to guess what it smelt of, and wrinkling their pretty noses, and laughing musically at each other's preposterous suggestions.

Now the sun had set, and the other vehicles were stopping awhile to rest the animals. Natalia and Sophia ran everywhere, flitting through the dusk like moths, dancing with the delight of being able to move again, watching some one make a fire, nursing some one else's baby, recognising some acquaintance in the crowd. Now that the darkness had filled in the ominous crevices in the woods, and now that the cheerful fires were lit, the fear of the Cossacks was beginning to melt away. Savoury smells mingled in the air with wood-smoke, and the guitars, which had had a siesta in the afternoon, were brought out again. Those gathered round the fires saw visions in them, of home, and love, of the famed city of Paris, of reunions and rejoicings. Every one was happy and exhausted.

Julie, after much weary searching, had at last discovered the Khovanski coach. She found Madame Khovanski sitting on the lowest step of it, in a state of profound despair. The horse, still harnessed, was cropping the dusty grass at his feet. The coachman was nowhere to be seen. Madame Khovanski said he had suddenly decided he didn't want to go any further, and was now on his way back to Moscow.

"I promised him everything," she said dolefully, "I said that Gervais would most certainly give him a job at Versailles, and that he should have double the wages we agreed on."

"Double?" said Julie incredulously.

"Yes, Julie, and why not? We must leave it to God to provide something, mustn't we? But he wouldn't stay. He is a nasty, disagreeable man, and I hope his legs give out before he gets there."

"Where are the girls?"

"I don't know. I told them not to go far. They will be sorry for their poor mama when they learn how she has been stranded."

Even as she spoke, the two of them ran up, rushing to Julie and embracing her many times. She was too worried for them to be very warm in return. Madame Khovanski began the sad tale again, but they refused to be depressed. Natalia turned to Julie, stroking her hand persuasively.

"Our Julie will take care of us," she said. "Won't you, Julie? You know how to look after animals much better than that old pig-face did."

Julie shook her head.

"I must stay with my regiment," she said.

They became loud in their reproaches of her selfishness and lack of affection for them. They predicted horrible, bloody, violent deaths unless she joined them. They swore, first that they would return immediately to Moscow, and renounce the French nation for ever, and then, in the next breath, that, though she might be as fickle as the wind, they would follow her through thick and thin, to show her the steadfastness of the Khovanskis.

Julie looked from one to the other. The day had been exhausting for her, plunging her back, as it had, so violently into the old and unwelcome life. For the moment, this precious family seemed curiously brittle and unreal to her. She withdrew her hand slowly from Natalia's, marvelling afresh at the whiteness of her neck and arms, glowing almost phosphorescently in the moonlight. . . . Since the tragic day when she had tried to destroy Natalia and Gervais together, Julie had suffered torments. She loved them now more dearly than before. It was as if her separate loves for each had conjoined, becoming thereby so much more. It wasn't a case of her having become reconciled to their affection for each other. She had simply withdrawn herself from the picture, leaving the two of them, complete and happy, in each other. Her torment was not the torment of their love, it was the torment of her own inexcusable behaviour. The night after the fire she had not slept at all, but rocking herself to and fro in misery had repeated over and over again: "I should have seen it before. It was meant to be. They were made for each other." Now, as she looked at Natalia, she thought again: "Fool I was not to see it at the beginning! This lovely being is Gervais', and will make him a proper wife."

Aloud she said gently:

"You don't understand, my darlings. If I leave my regiment now, they will have every reason to

complain to the authorities when we reach the town, and perhaps to demand another vivandière. That won't do me any good for the next campaign."

"Ah, you silly! But how often have we told you that you are never, never going on another campaign? You are going to live with us and Gervais—and Gervais' mama and sister."

"Of course! And they should be glad to have you!"

Julie smiled again slowly. The quick, intense brilliance of the smile had died, and now it broke like the slow ripple of a pool. She rose, buckling her belt decisively. "If I argued with you from now till doomsday, I suppose it would be no good," she said. "But I tell you again, and for the last time, that I *am* going on another campaign, and that I *won't* live with you, however much I love you, or however much Gervais' mother and sister hate me." Seeing Natalia's lip tremble, she added hastily: "But I tell you what I *will* do; I'll come to you in between the campaigns, and tell you all the exciting things that have happened, if any have happened, and bring toys from the conquered cities for your babies."

Sophia and Madame Khovanski laughed, but Natalia turned away crossly.

"You're a heartless tiger of a woman," she said.

"No," said Julie, "I am a vivandière." She

walked off and began talking to the man in charge of the wagon immediately in front. Presently she came back.

"For a certain remuneration, which you are not on any account to give unless I'm present," she said, "this man will allow your horse to be tied to the back of his wagon. That will be cheaper than getting another coachman, and will cause less delay along the line." Before they could answer, she was hitching up the horse again. Sophia ran up to her.

"It is very kind of you, Julie," she said, "but it will do in the morning."

"It won't do in the morning," said Julie, "because the march begins again in half an hour." She tied the bridle of the horse firmly to a ring at the back of the other wagon. As she did so, she said over her shoulder: "You mustn't be surprised if I don't see you for some days. They are altering the position of the regiments, and I may be stationed farther up the line. I will come as soon as I possibly can." She tried to speak evenly, but her anxiety made her voice quiver. She went on giving useful information about the finding of water, and feeding of horses, and oiling of wheels; then she went back to the carriage door, and helped Sophia in. It was now so dark, that nothing more than a vague outline of anything could be seen, but, by the whiteness of their frocks under their fur coats, Julie discerned that

Madame Khovanski was sitting between her two daughters.

"Isn't the smell awful?" said Sophia.

Julie paused, then: "I can smell nothing but—lilac," she said.

Madame Khovanski sighed, and Natalia's tiny voice, heavy with sleep, said: "Our dear garden. . . . I wonder if there is lilac at Versailles?"

2

The southward march ended at Maloyaroslavetz. There that practically fictitious army, the Russian one, opened heavy artillery fire on the surprised troops. They replied with a gallant spurt in their old manner, but the dissipated morale and lack of organisation told, and the finish was unsatisfactory. Through a blur of smoke, and the apparently inevitable ashes, they stood among the ruins of the utterly destroyed town, dazed with lack of sleep, and once more watched the Russians fade away into the distance. They were not retreating, they just faded away. The rain, which had fallen heavily the day before, and stolen half the cannons (for the horses were by now far too feeble to lift them out of the ruts), began again, drearily, listlessly, filling the landscape with grey. The Italians crossed themselves, and wept with the rain. They had lost heavily in the battle. They rested there a bit, on the skeleton of the town, and erected crude shelters, but

the rain penetrated everything, and chilled them to the soul. It got into the soup and soaked the rye-bread. The colours of the standards began to run. The fires, lit with infinite trouble, went out immediately, and the Grand Army shivered, with wet feet and steaming clothes. They sat, too tired to move, too tried to complain, wondering dumbly at the calamity which had befallen them, and the rain ran down their foreheads, and down their cheeks, and hung in drops at the end of their long moustaches. They could not even smoke without a risk of choking themselves, so they chewed tobacco instead. Already they had discarded some of their more worthless plunder, but they still clung obstinately to the valuables. They sat now, with old plates before them, and delicately chased candlesticks and salt cellars, but there was no food to put on to the plates, and they used the candles for frying potatoes, not for candlesticks. The dead lay out in the open, and it was too wet to go and relieve them of what they had no longer any use for. It was too wet to do anything except to sit and chew tobacco and stare at nothing, and occasionally shiver painfully.

Into the midst of their despondency came a message like a flame. "We are turning westward!"

"What—westward?"

"Yes, we are turning home!"

Oh, then, what mattered the rain, and the grey

landscape, and the battle just fought! They were going home! They had an all-wise and all-considerate General, and he knew when he had conquered enough. Soon they would be with their wives and families again. They clasped their precious bundles to their damp chests, and forgot how hungry they were (and they were very hungry indeed).

Slowly, clumsily, the scattered army wheeled to the right. Behind them the dead and the discarded plunder marked their trail, until the ground became too sodden to hold them on the surface and drew them underneath. The cannon took a long time to sink, in spite of their weight, as if they desired to protest, as long as possible, against such waste of good material.

Next morning the rain ceased as imperceptibly as it had begun, but the sun that succeeded it was so pale and debilitated that it seemed no relation to the vigorous one that had cast such strong shadows, less than two days before. The Russians among the refugees greeted it apprehensively. They called it the winter sun. If it had been an over-ripened tomato hanging in the sky, Gervais would not have noticed. He was discussing the rearrangement of his home with Paul as he rode.

"The important thing," he said, "is to make the Khovanskis feel at home. These days Maman leaves her room so seldom that it ought to be

quite easy, but perhaps they had better live on a different floor from Baba for a bit until she gets used to them. Have we got a suite of white furniture, do you remember? Natalia says she must have a suite of white furniture, with little wreaths of laurel all over it. Which side of the house is the warmest? They must have all the sunshine they can get. Do you think Madame Khovanski will mind Baba's annoying habit with her fork at table? Can you think of any nice girls for Sophia to chum up with?" and so on, and so forth.

Into the middle of Gervais' ingenuous questions, and Paul's ingenious replies, came the sharp crackle of rifle fire, and the deeper note of cannon. Gervais' horse fell beneath him, coughing convulsively. The line in front, foot soldiers, were grappling with mounted men, and every now and then a cannon ball, bursting in the centre of them, removed both sides together. The shock of falling, and the interruption of his engrossing conversation, enraged Gervais. He was no longer afraid, and he felt, as he charged forward on foot among the foot soldiers, "The impudence of it! The abominable *impudence* of it!" The rain had dampened all his powder, and, vexed with his own lack of foresight, he drew his sword. Some one came at him, evil-looking, waving a curved sword. Gervais slashed wildly, amateurishly, and stepped back in horror, to see his enemy roll at his feet, half decapitated. A sudden wild joy seized him,

an intense pride at his cleverness. He began to shout and sing, using the most terrible words he could think of, rejoicing in the sudden impact of sword against flesh, and the arduous driving home. It became like a game to him, meaning no more than a game. Blood and oaths, and heavy breathing, and crushing weights surrounded him. Something grazed his forehead, and set the blood running into his eyes and mouth. The baptism of blood. . . . Now he was a man! It became increasingly difficult to distinguish friend from enemy. His sword caught in somebody's belt, and sprang from his grasp. He wheeled round swiftly, and found an undersized man about to knife an already fighting Frenchman. Gervais shouted, and flung himself upon him, rolling him to the ground, pinning him like a vice between his knees, sinking his curved fingers into the man's throat. He never relaxed his hold until the body jerking beneath him suddenly stopped, straightened itself out, and the heavy head relaxed, rolling sideways. At the same moment a shower of grape-shot burst in the middle of the fighting group, spattering even the unwounded with blood. The enfeebled horses, once down, had neither the power nor the will to rise, and piled themselves heap on heap. Gervais stood upright for one moment, to wipe the blood out of his eyes, and at the same time a Cossack's sword, aimed at another man, glanced sharply off and slithered

across his knee. For a moment he thought that somebody's whip had lashed him violently, then he saw the slow, reluctant blood darkening his gaiter, and gathering in beads on the buttons. He limped out of the mêlée, and stood at the side of the road, meditating. A hundred visions of men similarly wounded that he had seen in the hospital of St. Blaise rose before him, and he knew that his leg was doomed. The strange thought of it, separating him as it did from the actualities of the present moment, gave him the look of a drunken man.

By now most of the Cossacks had made off again, losing themselves in the thinly-wooded parts. Paul galloped up, fresh from chasing them off, and saw his brother standing there. Most of the men were similarly hurt, and the less injured ones were busying themselves with the others. Standing in his stirrups, Paul could see the winding columns ahead. He whistled through his teeth.

"What a cowardly thing to do! What a damned cowardly thing to do, cutting off a platoon like that!"

Gervais was standing so still that Paul jumped down and went up to him. His face was very white.

"Just consider, Paul," he said, when he knew that Paul was there. "Just consider."

"What?"

"Well, my leg's done for." He would say no more, though Paul was already examining the wound with deft fingers. Presently he looked up, laughing at his brother to tell him it was only a surface scratch, but Gervais was lost in a dream again of all the times when he had used his legs. As a little boy, running from the gardener at St. Siriac, after stealing pears. In the races at school, bathing in a pool one summer during manœuvres, and kicking up a froth with vigorous heels—and now this leg was to go, just as if it had behaved badly, and wasn't going to be allowed to enjoy as much of life as the other one. It was to be taken away from him, the leg he had been born with, and it would be thrown down somewhere, as if it had never done him or anyone else any service, and then it would rot and wither away, while the rest of him was strong and hale. How strange, perhaps he would never know where that part of him was going to be left! It would seem heartless, he thought, to leave it just like that. The blood now was staining the ground with dark spots. It fascinated him. Even if another charge of Cossacks were to come, he would never be able to take his eyes off that blood.

An orderly, cantering up, saw the dishevelled group of men.

"Cossacks?"

"Yes!"

"Get on ahead, there are several skulkers round

about here. Get ahead, rejoin your regiment!" and he was off like the wind. Paul had bound up Gervais' leg, and was urging him to mount, but he couldn't rouse him out of the silly coma. The others were by now formed into a pitiful platoon, a quarter what it was, and all without horses except Paul and a soldier who had joined them later. "Don't be a damn fool. I shan't wait for you if you're not coming now!" said Paul. Away in the distance the faint strains of a band could be heard.

Somehow or other Paul got Gervais into the saddle, then leading the horse at a run he followed after the others, Gervais bumping in the saddle in the most ungainly way. He was wondering as he went whether the leg would perhaps shake off and save the trouble of an operation. Already that reluctant, unceasing, dark stain had stolen through the bandages, and was marking the horse's side.

As they went, the men grumbled continually. There was far too much of this guerilla warfare, and the Emperor himself had protested against it. Gentlemen didn't fight in this way. They met face to face on the battlefield, or else took each other by surprise, but always taking care that there were even numbers on both sides. (Besides, the times were so few when they *did* take each other by surprise, that they might be counted as non-existent.) But skulking in hedges, and on

the other side of hills, and in dark woods, and then spurting out in twos and threes, on an unsuspecting platoon, at peace with all the world, and going home as quietly as it could, it was not done. It introduced a nasty, common, bourgeois tone into the aristocratic game of war. With a pathetic insistence on the ungentlemanliness of guerilla warfare the Grand Army concerned themselves all the way home, and until they died they never forgot it. Yes, even as they went, and as they protested, they shrugged their shoulders, grimacing expressively. "What can you expect?" they said to one another. "They are Cossacks!"

3

Julie's regiment had turned westwards with the rest. They were amongst those unfortunates whose food supplies, never properly regulated during the whole campaign, had completely disappeared on the homeward journey. Since they left Moscow they had lived on what they themselves had looted before leaving, and now they had come to the end of their supplies. The C.O. sent urgent notes to his C.O., and his C.O., discovering the note next day, read it hastily, and concluded that somebody else had dealt with the matter. When he got another polite, urgent message, saying that the men were really quite weak for lack of food, he sat down, putting off all other work for the moment, and instituted an in-

quiry as to how it was the note had not been received by him at the proper time. When he could delay matters no longer (for he was as ignorant as they were about where their food was to come from), he sent a polite note by a special adjutant to his marshal. The special adjutant was killed on the way by the sorely-tried peasantry, who mistook him for a similar soldier who had ridden hell-for-leather into the centre of their fowls only half an hour before and strung them up to his saddle, vanishing into dust a few moments after. The marshal, receiving the second letter, held a court of inquiry into the first adjutant's death, and sent back a hamper by the second adjutant, containing half a fresh-boiled fowl, a rather tired-looking beetroot, and a bottle of abominable corn brandy, under the misapprehension that it was only the C.O. who was hungry. When this matter had been explained to him several days later, he was properly distressed, and sent a special adjutant through to the Emperor himself. The Emperor read the dispatch while taking coffee after dinner, and turning to another marshal, who had come to complain personally about the shortage of food supplies, said: "This regiment has not been provided with eatables. Find it some. I shall hold you responsible."

No doubt the original regiment, could it have beheld all these amusing incidents, would have split its sides, but it was not able to see them, and

so it waxed hungrier and angrier every day. The nights, too, were turning chilly, and a full man feels so much warmer than an empty man. Julie, who had wisely provided for herself before leaving Moscow, always hid when she was taking her one meal a day. She had wrapped several loaves in a damp cloth tied to the saddle, and was living on these, and sugar that she begged from a better-off regiment. She felt sorry for her own men, but she could do nothing about it, and to give some of her own food to one of them would only create bitterness amongst the others. She sustained them as well as she could with her wines and beers, sometimes slipping a biscuit into the hand of one who roused her compassion at that moment, by resembling Gervais in some fleeting gesture.

In spite of the lack of food, the march went on, making detours to avoid the ever-increasing bands of Cossacks. As they went, they noticed landmarks here and there that showed them they were back on the old road, and for a moment they forgot their hunger and weariness. This was the road that was leading them home! But they no longer sang as they went, and their feet were so sore that they bound them up in old rags, that impeded their progress and gave the whole regiment a beggarly appearance. At nights, in the brief rests they were allowed, they slept fitfully, never sure of safety from the Cossacks. Even

those regiments who had never met with them shivered as they thought of them, for every day the tales of their insatiable cruelty and lust grew more terrifying, and the drummer-boys held each other's hands at nights.

Julie had predicted rightly. Her regiment had been moved farther up the line, and now, added to her other worries, was the thought of the unprotected Khovanski family. One morning she was up early, unable to sleep, and she made her way to the First Dragoons' camp. They had given up bivouacs, to keep the secret of their position. . . . A drowsy sentry tried to interrogate her, but before he had finished speaking she slipped past. Outside the officers' tent she met Paul, looking very young in the ghostly light, buckling on his paraphernalia. From the day she met him at the Khovanskis' she felt curiously shy of him, for he was so impossibly gentle with her, as if she were a child. He told her that Gervais had received a superficial wound in the leg, but that the doctor had attended to it, and he was sleeping quietly now. He could even walk with it, if he went slowly, although it was tied up in splints. Julie said:

"Tell him I saw the Khovanskis last week. They were very well." Then she was tongue-tied. Paul's polite interest, in spite of his manifest tiredness, incensed her. She guessed rightly that he had been with the others in trying to take Gervais'

attention off an ordinary little vivandière, that long, long time ago. He was so unlike Gervais. He was just what she had always expected a young officer to be, trim, calm, confident, and thoroughly disapproving of women who did men's work. She thought as she watched him: "Dress you in woman's clothes, and nobody would know you from your sister!" But she did him an injustice. He began to question her about how she had reached the camp. She had had to cross a stream to do so. She described her journey to him, accurately, dispassionately, as she always answered her official questioners in the town, but in spite of her stolid, grudging air, and the dull words she deliberately chose to paint her journey in, she could not hide the bravery and devotion of it from Paul. He watched her as she spoke, her eyes on the ground, the dark lashes shading her face. Behind her a group of rifles were stocked, tripod-wise. They seemed a fitting background to this intrepid spirit, Paul thought; then, an unusually poetic shiver passing through him: "Perhaps this girl is the Spirit of France!" Deliberately he recapitulated, making her repeat her slow tale.

"But what did you do when you found there was no ford to the river?"

"I jumped."

"Weren't you afraid you might miss the bank and sink?"

"There was a tree the other side. I could have caught hold of it."

"Water's cold this time of year, Julie." . . . It was the first time he had said her name, and she cast her eyes up at him suspiciously. He added quickly: "I'm sorry."

"Why? Because you called me Julie?" A suspicion of a smile flitted across her face.

"No, for much more than that."

Immediately the smile had gone. She had withdrawn into herself. He wondered then how much she knew. Whether it was possible, as Gervais had said, that she had honestly believed him to be Gervais that night. Anyhow, what was he apologising about? Gervais could never have married her. While he ruminated on the strangeness of women, she had turned her back, and was walking away. He was piqued and hurt. There she was, with his crucifix round her neck at this very minute, and she was walking away without a good-bye of any sort! He began running after her, half cursing himself for a fool as he went. As her figure blurred and melted in front of him, his desire increased. He would stop her, and talk to her. He would tell her how hard it was for him to find any comfort, how everybody loved Gervais, and nobody him. Suddenly he needed to take her in his arms. Now she was running too, but not as she had run to him that other night on the river bank, so long, long ago. . . . As he

caught up with her, she wheeled round on him, the heavy skirt swishing in the long, feathery grass, but her eyes were not frightened, they were full of pity. Paul began his poor, blundering tale, kneeling before this vivandière whom he had despised so much, beseeching her for favours. "Gervais—" he kept saying, "Gervais—" and mumbling strange, incomprehensible things. When she knew what it was that he wanted, she laid her hands on his shoulders. "You mustn't kneel to me, my lieutenant," she said. He began again, but she hushed him quickly, looking away from him, half afraid that in this pitiful, imploring mood, she might give way to him for the sake of his likeness to his brother. He went on: "Gervais is so happy. He has Natalia. I have nobody, and now you have nobody either. Who knows if we shall ever any of us come out of this alive?"

"What makes you say that?" she said, fearful for the Khovanskis.

"I know it," he said. "This is the worst war there has ever been. Why should we not take what comfort is left to us?"

There was a pause, pregnant with despair; then Julie spoke—very slowly.

"Are you faithful to your Emperor?" she said.

"Why—of course."

"Yes, you are. You love and revere him, don't you? Perhaps he will never notice you, never call

you by your name, and yet, you may have to die for him." She waited, her eyes on a duck that was gliding out of some reeds in the river below, and plashing down the centre of the stream. "That's how I feel about—Gervais," she said, and a minute later was gone.

4

The next day's march brought them back to Mojaisk, and back to the plain of Borodino. Before they saw it, they smelt it. Now, indeed, they could sup full of the horrors of war, if of nothing else! As they went by, the more sensible averted their eyes, and hid their faces in their sleeves, but the nightmare of the forty thousand corpses followed them for a long way, accusing them with their forgetfulness. Afterwards tales were told of a man who, wounded and unable to escape or to attract the scant services of the stretcher-bearers, had lived through those two months, drinking the putrid water of a stream blocked with the bodies of men and horses, and living inside a horse's stomach at night for warmth.

The re-passing of that battlefield seemed to Julie the second most terrible thing that happened to the troops. The first had been the set-back at Maloyaroslavetz, or was it because she, too, was suffering from the strain and lack of food, and so saw things in a distorted light? Both those events were big. Thousands were involved; the

next thing that happened was so small, so almost imperceptible, that nobody but Julie saw its significance. She had been marching along behind her regiment, leading Rousseau, for the path was slightly inclined, and his small feet, as delicately placed as those of a toe-dancer, slipped piteously on the smallest slant. As she walked she noticed a change in the air, and a tremor seemed to pass through the ground, a shivering, shuddering sigh, as if the whole world were falling asleep. Then the landscape had become greyer, more coldly illuminated than ever, and the white clouds had changed to grey in the sky, and others had joined them, as if all the clouds in the world congregated together, to look down in contempt at these little black specks struggling beneath them on a trackless, pitiless plain, that only grew trees that their enemies might shelter behind them.

And a bird flew across Julie's line of vision, from a perch in one gaunt pine to another, but before it had reached the other tree it fell, as unerringly as if it had been struck down by a stone. She ran to pick it up. It was of a kind unknown to her, but it felt, as all birds feel in one's hand, curiously limp and helpless. It was still warm, and the feathers of its extended throat fluttered gently, tinily, in the wind. The eyes were closed, and even while she held it, the claws sank down, down, until they were stretched out as stark and straight as any stick. A soldier, who had stopped

to fix his substitute for shoes, looked over her shoulder.

"Poor little thing; dead of the cold," he said, and at the words the icy fear closed round Julie's heart.

Dead of the cold. She looked into the sky again. Now the clouds were gathered overhead in the steely skies, bending over the earth, compressing it, coming lower and lower, until she almost bent her head to avoid being crushed. *They* were all like this bird; they might be struck down as suddenly. It was an awful thing, she thought, when the very elements conspired against a helpless people. Even the wind blew against them now, ruffling the untidy locks of the soldiers, bellying out the canvas of the wagons to make the horses' task more impossible. It seemed to repeat Paul's words now in her ears: "Who knows if any of us will ever come out of this alive?"

From that moment the temperature fell. The warm glow of departing day that had cheered them through September and early October vanished as completely as if it had never been. Now began the sixteen-hour nights, and the wan days that took so long to be born, that died so prematurely. The clouds went, too, leaving a bare, leaden sky above a bare, leaden plain. The bright uniforms of the soldiers and their glittering plunder were only mockery. They would be swallowed up in this vast, never-ending icy space. As

milestones along the road, just as regularly the horses fell. Horse-meat was the only meat left, and nothing was wasted of them. In the evenings, when the whistling winds seemed to gather together for a last sweeping attempt to flatten down these presumptuous men, as they flattened the corn in the summer, the horses were picketed in a semi-circle to protect the soldiers. Fires, lit with blue fingers, puffed once or twice and went out. The green wood of the trees, young trees, the only ones the men felt strong enough to tackle, was useless as firewood. Then came a night so cold that Julie thought the end of the world had come at last. The world had swung out of its orbit, and was crashing away in space, far, far from the sun. Perhaps they were on the moon now. A dead world, that was what some one had told her the moon was. Surely this was a dead world, or soon would be. She had crept as close to Rousseau as possible during the night, for warmth, standing leaning on her folded arms across his back, but towards morning, he swung round his head to look at her, then sank down, as if to sleep. She hardly felt surprised as she took off the bridle. She had been lucky that he had lasted so long. Yet she had been good to him, fed him as long as she had been able, and never neglected him. She began speculating about souls as she sat there, the bridle in her hands. . . . She supposed that the souls of that bird and

of Rousseau, long imprisoned in their bodies, had leapt away joyfully when they were freed, as if they were glad to be rid at last of that clogging, dragging matter, called Life. Soldiers in battle did not die like that. She had seen their faces, and the look on them all was one of intense astonishment. Of course, they had known all along what a terrible thing death was, and yet, when it touched them personally, they were surprised, a little aggrieved: "How is it possible this thing has happened to *me?*" Perhaps it was only at the moment of death that they realised that a man has no business to kill another man.

Yet she had seen many die since the cold began, in the same way as the animals and birds died, simply, uncomplainingly. It was more like falling asleep. Her own body ached as she tensed her muscles to avoid shivering, and she did a rare thing, and took some brandy. The false fire of it went running through her veins, and she relaxed for a moment. A soldier, muffled to the ears, groped his way through the mist, and, after beating his hands together for warmth, sounded the reveille. And, at that identical moment, as if the skies had held their burden until then, small flakes of snow began to fall, circling in the gusty air, as if unwilling to reach earth too soon. As far as the eye could see, the whole landscape was reeling with snow—snow falling like feathers, tirelessly, changefully, unceasingly. And the snow

whispered in the ears of the worn-out soldiers: "Sleep on, sleep on. See, we bring you fine feathers for your bed, and the softest coverlet in the world. Sleep only a little longer, then join the march with renewed strength." And the soldiers slept, and died. In vain their comrades shook them, kicked them to make them rise. They were lost in a dream of warmth and love, things they had been too long without. . . . And the snow, which promised them their beds, gave them graves instead. In less than an hour, all those who still lay on the ground were hidden under a white mound. Not a vestige of colour stained the pure white, not a rag or button to say what lay there. Russia became a graveyard, through which the scarcely-living picked their way. . . .

Yet Julie received the change in the weather almost joyfully. Snow meant it would be warmer, so she had always been taught, and surely the sledges and wagons would move more readily on the roads once they were covered in firm snow. She said to herself: "That's right. That's right, it will be warmer," and bit her tongue badly, because her teeth were chattering beyond her control. To her left a group of soldiers, mostly veterans, were gathered round the first feeble flickers of a fire, and suddenly, deliciously, Julie smelt coffee. She joined them. They were too busy protecting the fire to notice her, until, at last, when one of them was filling the hastily held out

cups, he saw her. Some forgotten instinct of chivalry rose for a minute in him. He filled his own mug, and handed it to her. The others gave her one look, then turned and cursed him for a stupid idiot, but Julie eyed him gratefully over the steaming mug, as if to say that between them, at least, there was some kindness and generosity left in the world. She hardly dared ask where they had got the coffee from, half fearing that it was a magic thing, which would disappear before she had drunk it. The firewood was a small cart, and had probably contained reserve supplies for somebody before they had taken it. Her benefactor spoke.

"You look cold, vivandière."

"We're all cold," she answered.

"Ah, but we've got greatcoats at least. You'd better provide yourself with one, before it gets any worse."

"Will it get any worse, soldier?"

"Who can tell? At least it's very probable in this heathen country."

Several of the others growled at this to express agreement and shook their grizzled heads. He continued:

"You really should have a coat, or you won't be alive to-morrow morning. I know a nice chap who's got no use for his any more. He'd be glad to have you use it." Julie thanked him inaudibly. She was glad to be relieved of the job of "providing" herself with one. He went behind a small

thorn bush, hung with silvery snow like a Christmas-tree, and brought back a grey overcoat of the kind generally worn by soldiers. On Julie it reached her feet. The soldiers would have laughed, but it hurt their faces to laugh, and anyhow, they were used to strange sights, God knew! As he buttoned it beneath her chin, he said, "Merry Christmas!" and she answered him, "To you too, soldier."

That interlude brightened the whole day for her. As she went about her work, selling the wines and spirits, and washing out the cups with snow, she thought that the world was not such a bad place after all, and consequently, that they might soon be home. France was home. The word seemed very lovable to her then, and she longed for the day when she could say to the Khovanskis, "This is my country!" She began dreaming, and humming to herself, under the shelter of the collar of the greatcoat. The collar was so huge that it hid the rest of the world from her. She could pretend to herself that this was only a rather chilly day near the barracks at home in the garrison town. She could pretend anything! The thought of the Khovanskis kept recurring, and she began seriously to consider joining their coach. Then at least she wouldn't be bothered any more with worrying about how they were getting on. If the coach was too big and cumbersome, they might perhaps transfer to

a sledge. It would certainly be better, as long as the snow lasted. She thanked God piously that they had been able to spend last night warm and wrapped up in a coach, and not out on the ground like the poor soldiers. Now Rousseau was gone there was really no reason why she shouldn't join them. It would please Gervais, too, and she might still do a little trade among the refugees. When they reached a town she could tell the authorities that she had got separated from her regiment, and couldn't find them again. Snug and warm in her coat, and with the thought of the kindness of the soldier that morning warming her through and through, she began to dream about Natalia and Gervais.

The march began again in the afternoon.

5

And the snow deepened upon the ground, the cold became more intense, and the hunger among the troops became a gnawing, ravaging thing. Friends concealed crusts of bread from one another. Frozen potatoes were as hidden treasure. No one laughed any more, or joked. All glances were sullen and suspicious, and the marshals either rode ahead on horses carefully fed, or marched courageously in the midst of their officers.

When their feet became too heavy to drag another step, and the weight of the brave plunder

in their arms sank them still further into the snow, some of the men dropped out, rather than relinquish that which they had brought so far. They could be seen, half lying, half sitting, beside the road, their heads sunk down upon their chests, their eyes fixed unseeing on the snow at their feet. Their frost-bitten fingers still grasped some precious piece of uselessness, a gilt clock or statuette, a plate encrusted with jewels, a lacquer-worked vase. Together with their plunder, the snow covered them, effaced them, blotted them out as though they had never been.

And the others passed by, neither stopping nor remonstrating. Sometimes a man fell, through weakness, and the one behind would stumble over the fallen one, and cry pitifully, and curse him; then the warmth of the other body would warm him for a brief space of comfort, and he would sink into a sleep, and the snow would cover them together.

The coaches and other vehicles were having a bad time of it. Once they had passed Mojaisk most of them had been stopped, and ordered to take a wounded soldier each amongst them. As they were already crowded to overflowing, complaints were loud, and the wounded soldier, as often as not, was glad to die, to get away from the sickening jolts and perpetual nagging that went on. The sutlers, with their wives and large families, were loudest in complaints, though they had

hopes of getting some sort of payment for food and carriage afterwards. But the snow made matters far worse. They had to cut down their speed by half, and the extra weight was drawn by half the horse-power. At nights they rounded up in circles for protection both from the wind and from the Cossacks, but the farther they went the more separated they grew. The oxen-drawn vehicles had not been seen since the first two days, and all the carriages were in groups of two and three, with sometimes a solitary one between. The lack of every necessity of civilisation made men more beast-like day by day, both amongst the soldiers and the non-combatants. They kept together, not for orderliness or company, but because each one wished to keep his eye on his fellow, lest some hidden source of food or warmth should be revealed to him. Every step they took brought them, not nearer to France, but farther and farther away from all that had gone to make them men, to build up through centuries of slow progress the manhood of the most civilised nation in the world. They became not so much uncivilised as primeval. So might men have looked in the Ice Age. Those whose natures were too fine for such conditions, weakened by wounds or hunger, died. The others, by some malignant process, receded mentally and physically. Some became covered in a coarse growth of hair. So they staggered, stumbled, across the hard surface

of the earth, conscious now of three desires, warmth, food, and women. Scruples were dead, cleanliness was dead, possession was nine points of the law. . . . Now at last the greed, the lust for power of one man, found itself imitated every minute of every day. Fear, and disease, and distrust, and faithlessness, and filth bred like swarming maggots, and days, as fitful and irregular as candles, succeeded days. . . .

Yet somehow, in that frozen misery, Love lived, and Faith lived, and Hope was not a rotten cord all men were straining at, but something hidden and sure.

6

It was while the first stragglers were approaching Smolensk, firmly believing that there they should find warmth and food and rest, that Gervais passed Julie. He was on Paul's horse, and his leg was still in splints.

He reined in when he saw her.

"Hullo!" he said. "Where's your mule?"

"Dead."

"Oh? I'm sorry. Have you seen the Khovanskis since you sent me that message?"

"I haven't dared to start to look for them. We rest for such short periods."

"That's true, but it will be all right now. We'll go together at midday, before we reach the town. I'll come back for you," and he was away before

she could answer. She smiled to herself behind the shelter of the greatcoat. Everything was improving day by day, and now Gervais had actually said, "We'll go together." She watched him as far as she could, shading her eyes from the blinding dazzle of the snow; then began the slow, steady walk again. She looked a complete soldier now, for she had discarded her sabots for a pair of rough shoes, too small for any of the men, and her legs were gaitered. She carried her largest barrel slung over her shoulder, and as she walked she might have been a drummer-boy carrying his drum. Her heart sang in spite of the icy wind cutting her cracked lips; and the groaning of the wounded soldiers, and the heavy breathing of the weary ones, was less in her ears than Gervais' words. She sighed with happiness. However much Natalia might love him, she would always love him best, and that fact, at least, gave her some claim to him. . . . The snow crunched and crackled under her feet, and the wind stung her face until it smarted as if it were scorched, and brought stinging tears to her eyes. Some of the soldiers had icicles on their beards. As they fell, and tried to rise again, and sank down, the others passed by, their half-closed eyes fixed on the El Dorado ahead, Smolensk. They were glad as they went that they hadn't quite destroyed it that first time, and doubtless the enterprising Jews had already repaired the most vital damage.

Every now and then a sledge went by, travelling over the snow with a sound like rustling silk, carrying officers too weak to walk. To the soldiers such progress seemed the height of happiness, but the horses were famished, and when they fell, the sledges were helpless, stranded, like ships in the Polar Seas. . . .

At midday Gervais returned. This time he was walking. In an access of generosity, Julie presented the astonished soldiers with what remained in her barrel. After all, she wasn't coming back to them. She was going to stay with the Khovanskis now.

She told Gervais, as they trudged along, how they had tried to prevail on her to stay that first time, and half hoped he would be pleased with her for sticking to her job, but he only grunted. She asked if his leg hurt. He said, a little, but it didn't matter, and so they walked, sometimes talking, sometimes silent, retracing their steps until they should find the wagons. They were both tired, but when they spoke of Natalia their tiredness vanished. They vied with each other praising her beauty. Gervais boasted of how he would receive her at Versailles. "Like a queen," he kept saying, "like a queen."

"No," said Julie, "a queen is too old. More like a princess." Gervais looked at her sharply. Princess! Somebody had called Julie that once. Well, whoever they were, they should see her

now, and say whether the word suited! He smiled, unconsciously, at her, and she smiled back, timidly, endearingly.

At last they reached the encampment. It had shrunk since that first day, and the Khovanskis' coach was not in it. For a moment they stared at each other, terrified with the thought that they had been caught by the Cossacks. A man engaged in building a fire told them that the Khovanski coach was some distance behind still. They were reassured, but still worried. Taking each other's hands, they began to run, stumbling over the uneven ground. Every step took them farther and farther from the main body of troops, and in that afternoon, unencumbered by the slow paces of others, they more than retraced their march of the morning. Sometimes the sight of a single coach roused their hopes, then they would see that it was not the same colour, or the same size, as the one they searched for. Little groups of twos and threes regarded them suspiciously as they came running up, and again pointed backwards.

At last they recognised it from a distance, and their lagging steps quickened. It was standing with one or two others, in a clearing of pine trees. The man whose coach had preceded theirs greeted Julie politely. He said he had not seen the young ladies or their mama since that first evening, but he supposed they were being sensible and keeping

warm inside. Gervais and Julie nodded, scarcely hearing, and going to the door of the coach, they opened it gently.

Then they knew that they were dead. So sweet, so calm, so flower-like a sleep does not exist in this world. They were sitting as Julie had seen them last, the mother between the two girls. Their fair heads rested on her shoulder, and in each of her hands she held the hand of one of her daughters. On Sophia's face was the slightest frown, as if she alone wished to protest against such an end, but Natalia was smiling, sweetly, sweetly with the curved lips just parted, the heavy-lidded eyes closed in complete renunciation.

The slow tears rolled down Julie's face, dripping on to the floor of the coach. She could not deny it, yet she would not believe it. Surely Sophia would open her eyes in a moment, and say: "There! didn't we do it well?" and then that other precious one would smile, unable to keep still any longer, and her eyelids would flutter, as she stretched and yawned. Surely it was not possible that her darlings should be snatched from her thus! It was a mockery of life. It took away, in one moment, all the beauty and joy and love out of the world. She became conscious of Gervais, sobbing, leaning on his arm on the window of the coach, and she put her arms round him, still with the tears rolling down her wet face, and laid her face against his, trying to comfort him,

inarticulately. This common grief raised them up out of the reach of their fellows. They were apart, aloof, and their hearts were broken.

Presently he spoke, as if the effort eased him. She could hardly catch the words.

"We shouldn't have done it," he said. "We shouldn't have made them come—it was like uprooting flowers. They died, away from their own ground. They were so fragile, so beautiful. We were only meant to look at them, and then come away. Now the cold has killed them, and we are murderers."

Yet the smiling, tranquil faces of the Khovanskis denied him more vehemently than any words. He began to say Natalia's name over and over again, and lifted the little white hand lying so placidly on her lap. It was cold and stiff, like marble—or like the claw of a little bird. Julie could stand it no longer. She pulled at him, imploring him to come away, tugging at his coat almost hysterically. He wanted to kiss Natalia. "No!" she screamed. It was awful, it was sacrilege, it was mocking the dead. Somehow she got him away, and slammed the door of the coach to. Inside, the cold, grey light closed round the family once more, imperturbable, as if it had been waiting for them to go.

They were out in the real world again; the cold, the weariness, the hatred. As if to bring home the fact to them more clearly, at that instant rifle

fire came crackling through the clearing, and the man standing by the first coach fell. Immediately the cry arose: "Cossacks!" and the remaining people fled from the coaches away into the woods. Julie screamed into Gervais' ear: "Cossacks!" and began to half pull, half push him along. The sharp twigs of the pine trees caught at the belt of her coat, she struck her foot against concealed roots of trees, but Gervais moved like a sleep-walker, and would not be hastened. When she pulled too fast, he moaned, and she knew that the leg was hurting, but it was his leg or his life, so she never stopped until they were well within the thicket. She could hear the ponies moving about in the clearing and snorting, and presently she smelt the smoke of the burning coaches. She thought of the Khovanskis, and shut her eyes, pulling Gervais down to the ground and crouching over him, as a tigress might protect her young. He was still moaning, and she thrust a rough hand over his mouth. Minutes like hours passed. A thudding noise behind made her turn round. A white hare was sitting up on its haunches, staring intently at her and Gervais, and twitching its nose at the smell of the smoke, and she made a note of the fact mechanically, knowing they would soon need food desperately.

For a long time the crackling of the burning coaches went on, and she saw the flames flickering through the trees. Through pure weariness, she

found herself dozing over Gervais' prostrate body, and waking with a shock. For days she seemed to sit there, not daring to move, aching with the cold and the tension. The hare only enabled her to keep count of time, and it went on scratching in the snow, finding roots and eating, as if unconscious of her presence. She thought: "If a hare can live on roots, I can," and, gaining courage, began to dig herself. Her hands, already chapped, bled and stained the snow, but before she found anything the drowsiness became dangerous, and she staggered to her feet, guiding herself by tree trunks back to the clearing. It was deserted now except for the smouldering coaches. The Khovanski one stood untouched. Somehow or other, she managed to drag Gervais back there, risking the Cossacks' return rather than the certain death waiting them in the woods. Then she sank down, too, after gathering round them the rug from the Khovanski coach. Slowly the warmth of the fire penetrated. She was able to stay awake no longer. Death was a poor thing, worth nothing. Sleep was the only thing that mattered in the world.

7

When the ravenous soldiers poured into Smolensk once again, they found no warm welcome awaiting them. The houses spared from the first burning were shuttered and bolted against

intruders. The Jews alone did a busy trade, charging ludicrous prices for loaves of bread, frozen meat, beer, flour, and brandy, but even their eagerness to supply everybody was not equal to the demand, and before most of the very first men were satisfied there was no more to be had. The enraged soldiers began to tear down the shutters of shops, and to plunder all they found. They drank themselves dead. And just as there was nothing to eat for the main body of troops, so there was nowhere to shelter them, and they spent the night lying in the gutters, one on top of the other, for warmth. The filthy stench rising from cesspools and uncovered drains crept into their nostrils, and the wounds, which had reopened in the bustling and excitement, became gangrenous. By the next morning the town, which had seemed such a haven of refuge to them, became filled to overflowing with starving men, and, unsatisfied, more weary than before, they staggered outwards again, burning on their way. Many were unable to leave the warmth of the flames, and, going too close, were scorched. Others slept by them, and died.

After that they passed small villages, composed of six or seven log huts and a church. Sometimes they were deserted when they came up to them, the inhabitants already warned by the telegraphic thrill of fear. The officers, who crowded into these huts for warmth, suddenly found that the

roof had been torn off above their heads to make a fire for the men. After the roof, the rest of the place would be burnt, leaving nothing for the rest of the troops following after. Churches were used as stables and barracks, and the images and ikons defiled, for the men were filled with a blind, beast-like rage, and desired to drag all things down to their own level. The small rivers and lakes were frozen, and when the ice on them was broken to let the horses drink, the water underneath was black as ink. When they reached the Semlefsky lake, the Emperor commanded them to throw the trophies in, knowing that it was impossible to carry them further. It was done . . . And the men stood round, watching the great crosses and balls go slithering down, losing their jewelled brightness in the opaque depths. There at least they were safe from the Russians!

The snow still fell, making the roads impassable. Every minute another coach or cannon became a total loss. The officers sent urgent notes to the General, asking for permission to leave them, but they were denied it. Men were used to haul them up-hill. Down-hill the impetus of the wagons killed those that drew them. Misery piled on misery. . . . Time became confused, lost in this unending half-light, neither night nor day, and the last vestiges of order disappeared in the ranks. It was not so much that regiment mixed with regiment, army corps with army corps, mas-

ter bakers with artillerymen, but that there was no longer any difference in rank. Officers mingled with their men, stumbling along, unable to keep to any road, because there was no road, only a vast, treacherous plain, which secreted ice beneath its snow, and water beneath its ice. The clouds, appearing for a brief while, sailed serenely overhead, far above, away to warmer climes, and still the ants below, overburdened, underfed, scattered and lost each other, and struggled and fought and died. . . .

Julie and Gervais were only an infinitesimal part of those who were lost. They had woken the next morning by the last dying embers of the fire, and looked about them. There was nothing except the Khovanski coach and the dead horse between the shafts. The frost clung to everything it could, Gervais' hair and eyebrows, his buttons and straps. With infinite pains Julie coaxed the fire back, laying on it the bits of wood not yet burnt right out. She still carried a tin mug, and they had horse for breakfast. Gervais asked where they were. "We're left behind," she said. Slowly they drank their breakfast, measuring the strength of each other as they did so. This was no mere affair of love, this was a fight against death, and they knew it. Afterwards they staggered up, and began their march forward, arms about each other's necks, and the snow swallowed them up in the distance.

It is an awful thing to walk in a snowstorm with nothing to guide one's direction, nothing to tell if one is going forwards, backwards, or round in circles. For all they knew, they might be returning to Moscow, walking into their enemies. For all they knew, they had already crossed the border, and were in Poland again. They never spoke, they walked. When they came to a group of trees, they verged towards it mechanically, thinking that there they would find their comrades. Several times they narrowly escaped Cossacks. Days passed, and they saw nobody. They were no longer on the world, they were dirty, disgusting, and they were going down to Hell. They were never to stop walking any more. In the nights Gervais' leg hurt him so that he kept up a perpetual moan, shifting his position so that the rug came off them both, letting the cold wind in. Sometimes he grew delirious, and talked of St. Siriac, and his mother and sister. Julie listened dully, she was not warm enough to be interested. Once he said her name, and immediately after, Natalia's. Looking up into the midst of the unheeding stars, he cried Natalia's name several times. Then there was a pause, and he began to talk about his dog, praising its virtues, ordering it here and there. He turned to Julie saying, "You should see him swim! I will send him into the water after a stick when we reach home," then

whistled, calling its name. Towards morning the delirium went, and he complained of the intense cold. Julie raised herself on her elbow. Surely this anxious, worn old man was not Gervais! The blue eyes were sunken and bloodshot, with a rime of tears round them, and an untidy beard covered his face. He muttered something about his leg, and she unrolled the dirty bandage and examined it. The wound had festered, and showed an angry red. Even to her inexperienced eyes, she knew it was bad. She offered to wash it with snow, and warned him it would hurt. He screamed while she did it, but she set her teeth, and afterwards bound it up in a comparatively clean piece of petticoat. He swore at her in dirty barrack-room language. "You're trying to get even with me," he said, "because I don't love you. First you murdered Natalia, and now you're trying to murder me."

Julie answered sullenly, almost as if there were truth in the accusation, she was so tired:

"I didn't murder Natalia." A pause, then:

"Yes, you did. They told you that they needed you, and you refused to join them. Some fine talk about keeping to your job! You knew that they would die. They weren't used to roughing it, and you let them—all because you were jealous of Natalia, because I loved her." Then his leg would hurt him, and he would scream, and swear,

and if she tried to help him in any way, he pushed her away, saying: "Get away! Get out! You'll get nothing from me."

Next day he was unable to bear any weight on his leg, so they stayed, and Julie dug for roots again, and set an elementary kind of trap for a rabbit, baited with their last piece of horse-meat. The trap failed, so they ate the meat. The day after they began the walk again, Julie half carrying Gervais. They didn't get very far, but they saw more Cossacks, this time with French prisoners, then the snow caught them again, and interminable time passed before they were conscious of anything else but pain and hunger and weariness.

It was a strange journey. It seemed longer than anything else that had ever happened in their lives. The whole of the campaign could have been compressed into an afternoon, compared with that journey. Gervais only spoke to complain, or to curse Julie, and Julie never spoke at all. It seemed ironical that these two, once lovers, having renounced each other, should be thus thrown together in a relationship nearer than anything else in the world. Though they walked with their arms entwined about each other, though they slept locked in each other's arms for warmth, no intimate sympathy existed between them, nothing but the dullest indifference joined them. The cold had frozen their hearts towards one another.

Once Gervais said savagely: "Why don't you go on ahead, and leave me to die?" but she shook her head, and would not answer. There *was* no answer.

Once, when they were resting in some woods, a bear went ambling past. He was too intent on his own business to notice them, but they thought he was a Jew in a fur coat, and hailed him, thinking they would pay him to guide them to a shelter. He turned and eyed them, blinking his tiny black eyes, and swaying his head. He rose on his hind legs to see them better, then sunk down again, in the graceful-clumsy way of bears. At that moment they thought they were doomed, and clung to one another fearfully. Far better to die by the well-known way of hunger and cold, than by wild beasts! However, he appeared to be as nervous of them as they of him, and turned his back and went off. Another night they met Polish peasants, and knew they were not far from the border. When they showed their money they were allowed to shelter for the night, but the unnatural heat of the one-roomed hut with its charcoal stove nearly suffocated them, and they had to leave, coughing. . . . Oh! they saw strange sights, and underwent strange experiences on this journey of theirs! If they had seen the creation of the world, that night after Borodino, surely they were seeing the end of it now!

One night, when the moon was so full that it

flooded the snow with that scintillating brilliance that it sometimes casts upon the sea, they approached a village, quite burned down. The familiar sight raised their hopes, for it showed that they were near either Russians or French. As they stood looking at it, and at the only thing still left standing there, which was the belfry of a church, they saw the machinery of a clock move in the bare-ribbed skeleton, and heard it chime seven, sweetly and clearly to the deserted village. It was a ghostly sound. A clock to chime, and nobody to hear it but a lost vivandière and a wounded dragoon. . . . The cold air received the shivering tones, as if it would send them echoing all over the earth. . . .

There was a certain period in their weariness when they both became natural, as dying people do just before death. Their very accents changed towards each other. It was at the end of a long day, when they had gone only three miles or so, and they were both sitting on a snowdrift before turning the bend in the road ahead. They were afraid of these hidden views, lest there should be nothing round the corner but another waste of snow, so they paused there. It was not that they feared they were lost any more (for the fallen snow-covered objects in the road told them that others had passed that way), but just that now they could go no farther, and must die there. Gervais spoke.

"Do you remember how sweet that church clock sounded?"

"Yes."

"I think it must have been chiming for us, Julie."

She turned and looked at him. Underneath the matted hair and beard, she knew that the face was the face of Gervais again, and with an effort she smiled and shook her head.

"That's not the way for a soldier of the Emperor to talk."

"But it's true. I can't go any farther, and you look finished too."

"Never say die, my lieutenant."

He stared at her.

"You're a brave one, whatever your faults. Do you hear?" for she had not answered. "You're a good soldier, Julie."

For a time they stopped speaking as if the unusual effort had tired them. Every now and then Gervais murmured, "Good soldier . . . yes, good soldier . . ." Eventually he began again, wiping the frost from his sleeves.

"This has been a queer show, hasn't it? I mean the way you and I have been thrown together. First that day in the mayor's office, then the garrison town, then Vitebsk, then Borodino, then . . . Moscow . . . and now . . . this. I wonder if it would have been better if I hadn't offered to help you that time. I wonder where I

should be now, if I'd just walked away then, without taking any notice. . . . It's funny how things turn out." He turned to her: "You see, I shan't have to lose my leg after all." She misunderstood him, thinking that his cheerful frame of mind was returning, but when she tried to reassure him, he shook his head. "I mean we're going to die," he said, "that's why."

"Do you know anything about Heaven?" he said, as if it were a town he had not visited himself, but which she might have camped in. She shook her head then. "I hope I shall go to Heaven," he said, "because Natalia is there. Of course, there's no marrying or giving in marriage, but it will be wonderful to be near her, just to be near her."

"Where do you think I shall go?" Julie asked, nervous with the prospect of the journey so close upon them.

"Well, mind you," he said, "I'm not sure that I believe in any place at all, only, of course, as a good Catholic, I shouldn't say that. The trouble is, one has to take so much for granted. I don't see that anybody can say where they're going to until they've been there," he went on, "and even then, every one's impressions are different. I mean, what I was told a campaign was like was very different from what a campaign really is. I'm afraid Heaven may turn out to be like that."

"And you don't know where I'll go?" she asked again.

He considered.

"According to schedule," he said, "first you'll go to Purgatory. Just for signing papers, and getting your place allotted. There they'll question you—"

"Oh, I'm used to that," she said, reassured, imagining a heavenly Town Hall, with a heavenly officer in full general's uniform, with wings sprouting under his epaulettes.

"Then you'll have to answer them," Gervais went on, "and they'll probably come down on you pretty heavy for some things. For instance, for having had lovers," he said.

She looked at him, unwavering.

"I swear I have never loved anybody but you, Gervais," she answered.

"Ah! that's different. That doesn't count," he said, and went on: "And for wearing men's clothes. They won't like that. It's immoral. And for telling lies. Have you ever told lies?"

"I'm not perfect," Julie said, but he hardly heard, he was so busy with his imagining. "Then they'll ask you about the Khovanskis, and you will have to tell the truth, because they know the truth already."

"And what will I say?" said Julie.

"You must tell them how they asked you to stay with them, and how you refused," he said.

She took a quick breath, pressing her hands to her breast, then she began to speak, in the quick, clipped tones he had first heard her use.

"I don't care what *they* think, Gervais," she said. "I don't care what anybody thinks, but you must believe me. I thought it was right not to stay with them. I thought you would be pleased with me if I stayed with the men. How was I to know," she said piteously, "that they would die like that?"

Gervais stopped rubbing the snow from his sleeve, and looked at her, and at the same moment she began to say something, beginning "Natalia—" It was unwise, for the name called up the vision to Gervais again. A Natalia in a white frock, descending from the skies, coming between him and this poor, ugly thing in front of him. His throat ached intolerably, and he thought: "Wait a little, only a little, my darling, and I am coming to you." The promise of rest in the words set him at peace with all the world, and the vision retreated, as if satisfied, and again he saw Julie.

"Before I die, Julie," he said, "I should like you to know that I forgive you; I should hate to leave this world feeling I had left any one unhappy. It was my fault, too. Perhaps if I hadn't seen so much of you, you would never have loved me." He paused. "If you will say a prayer for me," he said, "I will for you." Julie said nothing, but

she touched his hand for a moment with hers, then they both leant back, pillowing their heads into the snow, and let their eyes close, never to open again.

Five minutes after they heard a scrunching on the snow, and looked up. Appearing round the corner of the ridge of snow were several Cossacks. Gervais straightened up, putting his hand to the knife he had kept in his belt all along, but Julie hailed them, jumping up, and staggering forward, falling on her knees when her legs would carry her no farther, and crawling up to them. She had seen the familiar leggings under the Russian furs, and knew them to be French. Before she reached them, however, she fell forwards on to her face in the snow. While some came forward to help her up, others caught sight of Gervais feebly signalling to them. They took him under the armpits, and brought him back to their sergeant. The sergeant was standing with Julie in his arms, looking down at her. He opened the grey coat, and felt her heart, then nodded.

"A woman," he said to the others. They surged round closer in their curiosity, and the ones who supported Gervais were the closest. Her hand, hanging helplessly over the shoulder of the sergeant, caught in Gervais' lapel, and he saw the worn, frostbitten fingers relax, as if they gave away their hold on life joyfully. Her head fell back too, as it had done the evening in the café, on

Gervais' arm. Under the clumsy greatcoat, her body was so small, so small. She had burned with courage like a flame, that was it, and the brightness of the flame had concealed from him, until now, the smallness and the pitifulness of her. Gervais thought: "She is dead. She has stolen a march on me after all. She will see Natalia first." He wondered vaguely if they would recognise her now, for the brown, oval face was so pale, the poor mouth so cracked and blistered. Even while he wondered, the grey of Julie's coat blurred into the darker colour of the sergeant's fur, and the faces of the men swam before him. He collapsed.

8

The story of the retreat from Moscow is an epic in one sense only, and that is where its pages are lit by the names of Marshals Ney and Davout. It was the remnant of their forces that the dragoon and vivandière had just joined, nine hundred left of six thousand! To the ill-informed, the Emperor is the hero of that campaign. To the intelligent, Marshals Davout and Ney. Yet, as always, the world is too human to divide the honours of war equally. Such a sublime indifference to details of personality and appearance may only be reached where Justice is blindfolded. So it is that Ney's name is the one that emerges most triumphantly, most spectacularly, for Ney was left to certain death, and he defied it. The

glamour of war, fast fading from a comparatively civilised world, to disappear completely in the next century, surrounds Ney's deeds and words, changing them both to poetry. Davout was content with plain prose. He made no *bons mots,* as Ney did; he never grasped so much as the hem of Glory's garment. More distasteful, work-a-day jobs fell to his lot; his soldiers never loved him, as Ney's loved him. His own job of being in charge of the rearguard was taken away from him after Maloyaroslavetz, because he worked too slowly, and was given to Ney. Now he was sandwiched between different troops, accused of keeping to one, neglecting the other. Those behind snarled at him for hurrying on and giving them no support, and those in front cursed him for lagging behind. He took no notice of either. He belonged to the type of soldier that does a lot more than he ever gets credit for. He may receive no honour, except an occasional vague reference in military classrooms, and a sketchy description of his best manœuvre. His name is not strong enough to stand alone, when his deeds are forgotten. Nobody says of him "Ah, Davout!" as they say "Ah, Napoleon!" or "Ah, Wellington!" or "Ah, Ney!" (for there *are* people who say such names, and yet cannot accurately recall a single thing that any of them did). A vivid phrase leaps at them out of the past, or an anecdote about nothing to do with war, for the people

they mention were too big in some way for one sphere of life; they overflowed abundantly into another one. They were great lovers, great statesmen, great poets, as well as great soldiers. . . .

Yet Davout and Ney shared the same dangers, the one ignominiously, the other gloriously. When they both occupied Smolensk, after the rest of the army had gone ahead, Ney accused Davout of having allowed his soldiers to plunder his stores so that his own men could get none. Their men cut each other in the street, and managed to work up a storm in a teacup, just as if one war were not enough for them. The friction continued as long as they were both there, as if two bits of wood were being rubbed against each other, and would shortly burst into flame. It was an anxious time for them. They both knew that the Guards, the most protected, and therefore most fit, part of the army, were on ahead with the Emperor, and that after them followed all the rest of the army. They alone were left, and slowly, surely, the Russians meant to cut them off, to have them, in this blackened ruin of a city, at their mercy. The soldiers walked bitterly about the streets, vowing vengeance on some one—they didn't know whom. Every man in the town prayed for news of some sort from the Emperor, and for three whole days none came. Meanwhile the young soldiers, fresh drafted from France,

pestered the veterans for stories of the campaign. Was it true, as they had heard in Paris, that such and such a thing had happened? No, it was not true, and they were told so, with no mincing of the matter. How was it there was no fighting to be done? They were told to be patient, and very soon they would get all the fighting they could stomach. Then, at last, the message came through from the Emperor; Davout was to leave on the 16th of November to advance to Krasnoi, and Ney, *if not ready,* to leave on the 17th. As, in that short time, Ney had to see that not a man, or woman, capable of walking at all, was left within the walls—to mine the walls of the city, to prepare to blast them, and to get his men into a semblance of marching order (although they took along with them the burden of seven thousand non-combatants, refuse from all the previous occupations), he was not ready, so Davout, according to instructions, went on ahead, and Ney was left with his mere morsel of an army, thrown out of the retreating sledge to stay the ravening wolves of the Russians.

Nobody expected him to get through alive. There was no shelter for his troops along the road, there was no assistance, there was no food. But they knew he would put up a gallant fight against Milarodovitch, his counterpart in the Russian army, before he and his men were cut to ribbons.

Ney evacuated at dawn, and the walls of the city crumbled away under the explosions. There would be nothing for the Russians, if they went there, for even the sick and wounded died then, and the walls fell upon them, and buried them, more completely than anyone had been buried for days. As they went, the soldiers talked together, making bets as to how long it would be before they were attacked and annihilated, and the young soldiers, hearing them, gripped their muskets more firmly, and set their teeth.

That day they met no one, and thanked their stars. The next day, in a fog, they ran into Milarodovitch, and fought a pitched battle for a quarter of an hour. It was short and to the point, and Ney didn't want an encore. He decided to detour, going northwards across the Dnieper, and made preparations to that effect. Milarodovitch was annoyed, and sent several messengers to Ney, telling him to surrender. This distracted Ney, and he made the last messenger a prisoner, which was against etiquette, but excusable under the circumstances. When darkness came on, the French troops left their bivouac fires burning, and crept away. The first horse that trod on the ice put his hoof through. The first cannon went down with a rush. The non-combatants stood shivering on the banks, suggesting this and that, and getting in the way of the soldiers. When they were told to leave their vehicles and cross without, some of

them refused, and preferred to stay and perish, but the main body of the troops crossed. Shortly after the ice became unsafe, and they heaved a sigh of relief. Once more the children of Israel had got across, leaving the Egyptians on the wrong side! Unfortunately, there were Egyptians on that side too, as they soon learnt. Platof came down upon them from the north, almost while they were still recovering their breath from the crossing. It had been so long since the French had seen horses advance at anything more than a pathetic amble, neither trot, walk, nor canter, that they were ready to believe that the fast little ponies of the Russians were fiery, immortal ones, sired by Pegasus out of one of the golden mares that draws Apollo's chariot. They bore down upon them, with their guns on sledges, firing grapeshot and cannon-balls into the midst of the helpless French, who had little left to fight with but the hands they were born with. The French made for the woods, and hid there, occasionally knocking a too adventurous Cossack off his horse with their last bullet. One man who achieved this, rushed out of cover immediately after to chase the little pony. He returned proudly later, leading it by its late owner's sword-belt. But one pony does not make a victory, and Ney was besieged by anxious officers begging him to surrender, rather than die of starvation in the woods. Ney refused. He wasn't going to take advice

from anyone. The next day they crossed another river, and the man who had won the pony had to bid it a fond farewell. Several hundred stayed on the same side as the pony, through sheer inability to go any farther. They looked after their marshal as he disappeared in the distance, and wished him luck, then died. A little outside Orsha, Prince Eugene of Württemberg rode out of the town to meet them. Nine hundred left of six thousand, and all on foot!

The first thing their friends greeted them with was: "What a dirty trick of Davout's to leave you in the lurch like that!"

But all the mistakes and misunderstandings in the world cannot hide the glory of that undertaking. Others had attempted the impossible. Ney achieved it, and by his achievement glorified even their failures.

9

Julie came to herself in a low underground room, which had been turned into a regimental kitchen. She was lying on a pile of coats. Two cooks were bent over a roaring fire, twisting and turning a pig on a spit. It crackled and hissed as they turned it, filling the room with puffs of tiny blue smoke. Julie thought she had never smelt anything so appetising in her life. Seated on the floor all over the room were more soldiers, in a uniform that was strange to her. They were read-

ing, playing cards, and mending their torn coats and stockings. One man, leaning against the door, was practising the "charge" on his cornet. This annoyed the others. They shouted at him to stop, but he only bowed to them apologetically, and said he had to get it right before to-morrow. To which a wit replied: "What d'you want to play the 'charge' for? You'd far better be practising the 'retreat.'"

"Or the last post!" They roared with laughter at that, and somebody threw a loaf at the joker. Julie shut her eyes again, snuggling down into the coats. They were rough under her cheek, but what a precious roughness after the icy smoothness of snow! Lying there, she could pretend again that they were home. The pig crackled away, making a noise as comfortable as a purring cat. Julie thought it would do her good to sleep again, but her fingers were burning painfully, and the cornet was not soothing to listen to. She wondered what town this was, and whether they were across the border yet. Surely they were. Towns were not like this in Russia! She marvelled afresh at the fact that she was lying within four walls, and even while she was staring at them, rejoicing in their warmth and solidity, her eyes closed involuntarily. When she woke again, a man was bending over her.

"Feeling better?" he asked kindly. She nodded. He turned to the others and shouted "She's

awake!" and they came crowding round, asking her questions, tucking her in, straightening her out, feeling her pulse, arguing with each other about what was good for her. She answered nothing, but looked from one to the other, filling her eyes with their bright uniforms and kindly faces, to obliterate the image of the blinding empty wastes of snow from them. At last some one brought her a cup of bouillon, scalding hot, and supported her while she drank it. "There, has that melted the icicles?" they said. She nodded again and tried to speak, but her voice sounded so ridiculous and far away that she gave it up. They tucked her in again, shouting that she was to sleep well, and not trouble about anything at all . . . and she sank down deep again into heavy slumber. . . .

Next day she felt better, but there were only the cooks left in the room. The others, they said, were out at the munition stores, getting re-equipped. Her heart leapt at that.

"Are we across the border?" she said.

"No, Orsha," they answered, and went on to argue between themselves about the stuffing that goes with pork. Later the man who had brought her the bouillon returned. He was more communicative and more inquisitive. She asked after Gervais. "Oh, he's been sent on to Bobr, to his own corps," he said. "The marshal seemed to know him, and was pleased that he got through.

We've no doctors here, and they'll see to his leg at Bobr," he said.

He pestered her with questions about how they had managed when they were lost. He'd lost his best friend that way, he said. But when he found that she was unwilling to discuss it, instead he showed her all his loot, telling her where each little thing was to go. "This is for my Aunt Marie, because she's a great one for sweets," or "That is for my sweetheart, because blue suits her."

She learned then that she was with the rear-guard, or what remained of it, and that they were not yet out of Russia. They had to cross the Beresina first, and reconnaissance was going on between the Russians and the French to find out who would get there first. As far as Julie could discover, the Russian wings seemed to be closing in like lock-gates to bar their retreat, perhaps even to drive them back to perish in the snow! She shuddered involuntarily. Better to die here than that. . . . But the men seemed very cheerful. Perhaps they felt that having survived so much already they would receive a safe-conduct card for the rest of the way. Soldiers are optimists.

At the midday meal Julie became the heroine of the day. They had lost their own vivandière in Moscow, and were pathetically pleased to see one again. Of course they had had women in plenty,

both in Moscow and during the retreat, but a vivandière made them think of home, and civilised regiments, and the comforts of life. It turned out that some of them knew her mother, either personally or by reputation, but Julie was not as pleased as she should have been, at hearing that. The older soldiers especially could not leave her alone. One by one they came and sat at her side, and told her their trials and troubles, and one by one the younger ones came and wooed her for her favours. The attention she received made her blossom like a flower in the sun, and the colour came back into her cheeks, and the soft brilliance into her eyes. She began to take a hand in the cooking, and added flavour to the dishes. She mended the clothes of the older men, when her frostbite went, and attended to her own wardrobe, so that in a week she was a transformed creature.

She had been thinking a lot as she lay resting, and trying to force some conclusion from her experiences. It seemed so absurd to her that one could benefit by one's mistakes in any given department in life, except life itself. Soldiers didn't go on making the same mistake time after time in battle. If once they went into action with a rusty trigger, they saw that it was clean and bright next time. It seemed so silly, then, that one shouldn't be able to do the same thing oneself—to thrust away all the unprofitable, miserable part of one's

existence, and make the most of the other part. Her own troubles, she concluded, came from trying too high. Well, she'd fallen with a bump once, and she didn't mean to do it twice! The memory of the Khovanskis still went through her mind swiftly and tragically, leaving the bitter feeling of tears in its wake, but she supposed that time would heal that wound, as it healed most others. She had no wish for the memory of Gervais to hurt her in the same way. She wanted his memory to be separate, unsullied, a beautiful incident in a rather drab life. Of course, there hadn't been anything particularly beautiful about the way he behaved when they were lost, but he was in pain then, and she could forgive him, even when he talked about forgiving her. She supposed that, had she been in a different position in life, she might have continued a hopeless affection for him, and gone into a nunnery the better to indulge it. But the thought displeased her. Perhaps she wasn't spiritual enough to see the use of nunneries, except in the case of sickness. It seemed a waste to her to shut up young lives in dark cloisters, and Julie abhorred waste. No, she would be a "good soldier," as Gervais had called her, and she'd fight her battle all right, without running away. Any other idea she might have cherished once, any dream of leisure in a lilac-filled garden, well, it *was* only a dream, and now she was awake.

One evening she was coming back to the kitchen with two full pails of water from the nearest well, and she met a man in the doorway. He never moved to get out of her way, and when she looked up, she saw that she knew him.

"Why, if it isn't Julie!" he said. It was Gibeau the smith. He made her put down the pails, and shook her hands for a long time, holding her at arm's length the better to see her. "Where have you been all this long time?" he said. Sitting over a steaming cup of bouillon, Julie told him, and his interest was so intense that she elaborated the smallest detail, and even ventured a small joke or two, at which he laughed uproariously. When that was done, he turned to the soldiers near, and insisted on telling them all the funny things Julie had done as a child, and all her mother's scandalous sayings, and all the campaigns she had been through. "This girl here," he was saying, "was born to the sound of a salvo of guns; she was weaned at three weeks and put on the bottle. Only it wasn't milk in the bottle, it was brandy! Her father was a marquis, but the only powder *she's* ever had on her hair is gunpowder. She could walk at nine months, talk at a year, and had a remarkable vocabulary of bad language before she was three. When there wasn't a campaign on, she pickpocketed for a change, and got a unique knowledge of the coin of the realm.

She's travelled over half the globe, Egypt and Spain and Austria, but there's no Egyptian Sphinx, and no Spanish Lady, and no Fata Morgana, with half the guts of Julie. Blood's thicker than water, and Julie knows it, for she's seen a sight more blood than she ever has water.

"The only doll she had was a cannon-sponge on a used fuse-stick, dressed in a soldier's waistcoat, yes, it's true, and the only time she ever had a roof over her head which didn't let the water in, was when she was in quod. Listen! and God damn me if I tell a lie! Her cradle was a shell-box, hung from a tripod of guns. Her christening robes were two standards, taken from the Italians at Lodi. Her first sabots were looted from a Swiss shop. Her mother got a fine shawl at Jaffa, and cut it up into frocks for the family. At Marengo she went among the prisoners and reminded them of their own kids so much that she came away laden with food and money. She was at Vienna and Austerlitz, and made the best of both, all for her mother's benefit, of course. (Kids can get away with things when their parents would be sent to quod for it.) She learnt German at Berlin, but she was down with measles at the battle of Jena, and so couldn't see any of the fun. Eylau, Danzig, Friedland, Rome, Vimeiro, Wagram, Talavera, she knew them all! She was born vivandière, and she'll die in her shoes, like

the rest of us. I can make a poem up, too! Her eyes are black-currants from a French garden, her heart is a phœnix, burning with flames of courage for ever and ever. Let's drink to the health of the Emperor, the success of his enterprise, the damnation of the Russian armies, and the black eyes of Julie!"

They drank, they cheered lustily, they clapped Gibeau on the back, and begged him for further details, and he began again, whispering so that Julie could not hear, looking at her over his shoulder with wickedly shining eyes. The soldiers were standing listening, their heads on one side, and every now and then they roared with laughter. The laughter became infectious. They couldn't stop. They held their sides, and the tears ran down their cheeks while they squirmed and wriggled in an exquisite pain. Julie, watching them, couldn't help laughing too. She would never have thought herself to be so amusing; but that was like Gibeau, he found everything amusing, he saw a joke in everything. Perhaps that was why everyone was so fond of him. Even her mother, in her worst moods, could be won over by Gibeau when he set his mind to it. She began to wonder why it was she hadn't missed Gibeau on the campaign. Suddenly he interrupted his story to jump up and say: "I say, have any of you fellows seen a truck of portable anvils?" at which they laughed more than ever, but it appeared that this wasn't

a joke, but a serious matter. They begged him to explain.

"Well, it's like this," he said, picking his teeth with a splinter of firewood. "Old Marshal Eblé, you know, with Marshal Oudinot, they've got to build bridges across the river, or the little pig won't be able to go home! You see, the Emperor rather upset them when he had the pontoon train burnt here."

"The pontoon train!" cried several voices in dismay.

"Yes, the one and only. Now Marshal Eblé has got to build another, so he's sent me back for spare parts. If you know of any, tell me where they are."

As soon as the men knew that they were personally involved, they were only too ready to be helpful. They scratched their heads in an effort to recall anything of an engineering nature that they might have seen lying about, and Gibeau sat on the edge of the table, swinging his legs, picking his teeth, and throwing bright glances at Julie every now and then, as if to say: "Look what a flurry I've put all these young fellows into!" It was as if he included her in his own special department, the important part of the campaign. "Soldiers are six a penny, but you can't find a fine chap, and a really good smith, like me, every day!" That was his point of view. When he jumped to his feet, he kicked over one of the pails of water.

Julie knelt to pick it up, and he bent down, putting his warm hand on her wrist, and whispering: "Now we'll go and get some more, eh?"

They went, and the soldiers laughed, and nudged each other, before they lay down to sleep, but their heads did not rest easy on their makeshift pillows, for they were one and all thinking of the fate of the pontoon train, and remembering all the terrible crossings of bridges they had hitherto endured. Yet their lips were locked to each other, they would never admit it. One man, lying sleepless, heard his neighbour turn and sigh heavily, slowly:

"What's the matter, Gaston?"

"Oh, I dunno! My belly's as stiff and heavy as a coffin-lid."

"It's those pickled plums you stole, that's what it is."

"'M . . . Yes."

"You'll feel easier in the morning."

"Yes. Goo'-night, Pierre."

"Good night, Gaston."

10

At Bobr the Emperor waited impatiently for news. His marshals, spread round about him on all sides, like the loose strands of a spider's web, sought for something solid and satisfying to tie their frail hopes to, but could find nothing. Their last chance had been the river Beresina, and the

latest bulletin was, "The Russian army of Moldavia has reached the Beresina, and has occupied all the crossings." Yes, the Russian army, that mysterious disappearing-trick, was certainly coming up to the mark, according to rules of war. They had fulfilled the first commandment only too thoroughly, "Never let your enemy know what you're going to do next." It wasn't a question of one army either. There had been two on the way into Russia, but now there were God knows how many! They had even got an admiral to come into it. True, since Orsha, things hadn't been so bad, because there had been fresh supplies of food and equipment, but what was the good of that, since they were locked in this trap, helpless?

Old generals, who should have been spending their days sitting in the sunny corners of a walled-in garden, rode up and down the river banks, half hidden in the eternal mist, and slept only at odd intervals. Young captains, more serious than they had ever been in their lives before, studied charts and crossings, and ran errands for their superiors. Soldiers lolled about, too anxious to feel the cold, and asked each other what was going to happen. And the river lay before them, grim, and freezing, as insuperable a barrier as Time. . . .

Gervais had arrived by sledge five days earlier, and had been waiting till now for the amputation. A doctor, so worn out that he trembled as he held

his implements, performed it, warned him against unnecessary exertion, and tottered on to the next bed, supporting himself on the rail with one hand as he felt the patient's pulse with the other. A Carmelite nun laid a cool hand on Gervais' forehead, then went on, following the doctor. Her face as she passed those ghastly sights was one of parchment-like, antique pity, so stereotyped that it almost lacked the third dimension. Yet it was not that she had no pity; only that, in that emotion as in all others, she did as she was taught. There were several of them in the hospital, moving about in their long blue garments, like so many mothers of God, and their hands, even when they performed the most menial action, fell of one accord into some holy pose.

Paul came to see him later on, with his tall hat under his arm, and worried lines in his forehead. He listened to Gervais' tale without interrupting, seeing that it eased him to talk. Gervais finished with: "Well, you see, I did lose my leg."

He sounded so childishly proud of the fact that Paul answered irritably: "You ought to be bloody grateful you didn't lose your life, too."

"Yes. I suppose—if it hadn't been for Marshal Ney recognising me—"

"Marshal Ney! That for Marshal Ney!!" and Paul snapped his fingers. Then he leaned forward, fixing Gervais' eyes with his own. He went on: "It's Julie you should be grateful to,

Gervais. It's she who saved your life. Yes, you can twist about as much as you like, but it's true. If you didn't want to owe her anything, why go and get lost with your leg in that gammy condition? You don't mean to tell me you could have looked after yourself, if she'd left you!"

"She didn't leave me," Gervais said sulkily.

"Of course she didn't. She's too fine for anything mean like that. Well, just consider how fine a thing it was to do, Gervais, knowing, as she did, that you loved Natalia. She didn't care. She loved you, and that was enough."

Gervais could keep up the sulking no longer. He smiled broadly.

"Dear me! What a lot of righteous indignation, and all to a poor chap who's just lost a leg, and is busy mourning its decease. What d'you want me to do then? Marry her?" He waited, still smiling, for Paul's immediate denial, but Paul only stroked his chin, staring at the ground, then he said:

"Well, it isn't as mad as it sounds . . ."

"My dear chap! My poor lunatic! What are you thinking of? The girl herself has too much sense to expect *that*."

"That's just it, Gervais. She always *has* known what you're not capable of. The sort of height which you can't attain. I thought it might be a good thing, if you could surprise her, just this once, with—"

"Yes, and surprise Maman and Baba, too. Then we'll all be happy, won't we? I can see my triumphant arrival at home, complete with barmaid for wife, and all the guests at the reception turning up their noses, and turning down their thumbs! I implore you, Paul, stay sane a little longer! We're not acting a fairy story, we're fighting the Russians."

Paul stared at him. "What's the matter with you?" he said.

Gervais whistled a bar or two before replying. "I'll tell you," he said. "I thought I was going to die, and I haven't died. I was in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and I've been delivered from it. My leg hurts, or rather what's left of it hurts, but I simply don't care. It's a scratch of a pin, compared with dying. Then you come here, with a long face, and try to work up a scare about Julie. Well, I simply won't be scared." He lowered his voice. "I tell you, I *was* scared though, when I thought she was dead, that time when they found us. But she was only in a faint. That's our luck, I believe."

Paul rose from the bedside, and went to the window, turning his back on his brother. Far away, winding along the plain, he could see the Beresina, the last barrier that separated them from home. Gervais went on speaking. Suddenly his brother turned on him:

"You're a dirty rotter, Gervais."

"Oh? And who was it *had* Julie, anyway?" They stared at each other, full of bitterness; then Paul laughed.

"Well," he said, "this is a funny business. We seem to have got into each other's skins by mistake. You, the idealist, suddenly turned materialist, and I . . ." He stopped, and in a different tone, he said: "Can't you see, Gervais, it's Julie who affects us like this? She seems to wipe out all the ordinary things. I don't mean the sensual side of her. Women as good as her, and better, can be had for the asking, but there's something *else* about her, some quality that's indefinable, unique. That's what worries me. You seem to have forgotten that. Because you *did* see it once. You told me that she came to you, 'like a flower.' Then you said I had ruined the flower. Well, as I see it, I never touched the real Julie at all, because she is yours, most completely. I'm not being idealistic when I tell you to marry her, but materialistic, because I don't think there can be many women like her in the world, and I don't want you to throw away a chance when you get it. As for Maman and Baba, they'd get used to it in time, and they could always blame the Revolution for it!"

"You don't know what you're suggesting, Paul," Gervais said.

"I do."

"It's unheard of. You don't even mitigate it by suggesting I should take her as a mistress."

"If you can say that, it just shows that you haven't understood a single word of what I've been saying."

"Oh, no doubt you mean well," Gervais went on. "But I think you've got a bit confused. Standards are so different here from what they are at home. *I* got spoofy like that, oh, just before we entered Moscow. I suppose it was the strain and things. I remember thinking I wasn't cut out for a soldier." He laughed softly. "What nonsense! I suppose every soldier thinks that at some time or other. Well, I've got over it now, thanks be. All that bunk is as dead as my poor leg."

"Very well." Paul came back to the bed. "I'm sorry I spoke. It was just a faint hope I had. . . . Of course, it isn't conventional, or sensible, or even reasonable, but I hate to think that all your life you will be owing that vivandière a debt that, however hard you try, you can never pay in full. This would have been one move in the right direction. Still—?" He shrugged his shoulders, and went to the door. "I'll look in some time to-morrow," he said, and went out.

Gervais made a face at the door, intending it for Paul's retreating back, but at that moment it re-opened, and another nun came in. She mistook

his expression for one of extreme pain, and hurried up to his bedside. "Sister," he said, looking up at her innocently, "is it your opinion that the mad are God's blessed ones?"

"The mad of this world are often the sane in Heaven," she answered guardedly.

"There was once a man in Moscow," Gervais continued, "who was so mad that he talked to Ivan the Terrible without flattering him, and threatened him with the wrath of God. He came to a violent end, and the pious built a church to him. It still stands, unless it's been burnt since we left. Sister, do you think that his madness was because God was putting courage into him, or just the outcome of a poor disordered brain?"

But when he turned to look at her, she was gone, having mistaken his light-heartedness for delirium. She could not know that he was deliberately indulging it to avoid the memory of Paul's words: ". . . All your life you will be owing that vivandière a debt that, however hard you try, you can never pay in full."

II

Gibeau had found his portable anvil, and was back again, with the other men-of-all-work of the army, on the banks of the Beresina. They had discovered enough material for two bridges, and had begun to make them. They used the houses of the village of Studyanka for the purpose, pull-

ing them down and converting them into trestles, ferry-rafts, and plain planks. Marshal Eblé, as immovable as an etching of Don Quixote on his famished horse, brooded over the undertaking, waiting all the time for news of Marshal Oudinot. On the other side of the river the Russian army spread itself at ease, waiting for the exhausted remnant of their enemy to cross the river and fall into their hands. The weather was not kind. It grew colder and colder, and the water assumed the static look which means it will shortly become ice. The engineers, sappers, and bridge-builders, up to their shoulders in it, complained bitterly as they worked, as if the heat of their indignation would somehow warm them. Those working on the banks were continually pestered by Jews, asking foolish questions and threatening revenge for the losses they had suffered. When they couldn't rouse the busy men to any reply, they said: "The Russians opposite have got their guns trained on you. What is the good of building bridges when they will be blown to smithereens before a single man can cross?" A sound criticism, but not a helpful one.

And slowly, slowly, the bank filled up with the Grand Army. Sometimes the men came in clumps, reminiscent of an unit, sometimes in pitiful groups of two and three. Behind them, as usual, marched Marshal Davout, fighting to the last inch of ground, obstructed and hindered by the vast num-

bers of non-combatants, now all fallen to the rear. Crying of women and children filled the daytime. Howling of distant wolves filled the night. And between the bravery of Davout and his troops, and the bravery of the bridge-builders, the Grand Army loitered, useless, weary, conscious of only one desire, to get home.

The situation was almost uncanny in its tragedy. They had never known so clearly before where their enemies were. (At nights they could see their bivouac fires.) They had never before been so close to them. Wherever they moved, along the river banks, the enemy would move too, following them watchfully, as a cat watches a mouse. Well, they would put up a last despairing fight. They would show the world that the spirit of the Grand Army was not yet dead, even if they themselves died in the demonstration. As they sat crouched over their smoking fires, watching, always watching the opposite bank, they could hear the small defiant noise of the anvils at work, beating round things into square things, and short things into long things, and horseshoes into iron nails, all to save men's lives. That sound never ceased. It went on day and night. It became absorbed into the air, and merged with the breeze, sometimes near, sometimes far, until the listeners were bewildered, and asked each other where the sound came from. In that question lay the answer of their safety, for the enemy asked each other,

too, and their bewilderment lost them the victory.

Russia did not lose that war, but she did not win it. The secret of the ultimate result lay buried as deep beneath the snows as the bones of the soldiers.

It was the Emperor's brain-wave that saved the French. He had sulked all the way from Moscow, and been so busy laying the blame on to everybody else that he had had no time for bright ideas. But the soldiers waited as patiently for the bright idea to come as a farmwife waits, when her best hen has stopped laying. She is not discouraged—the bird is only having a rest, it will begin laying again in a day or two, and perhaps produce an Egg that will startle the world. That is how the soldiers thought; and they clapped each other on the back when they heard of his idea. Their Emperor was getting back to his old form. They would be all right now! If they had been less exhausted, and more critical, they would have seen the plan was not really so bright after all. In his last extremity, the Emperor had conceived a plan so prehistoric in its simplicity that it rivalled the Trojan Horse. Perhaps the very audacity of such a suggestion moved the Gods to tears on his behalf. "Poor fellow. Has his genius really fallen to this? Then it would be a sin to destroy him utterly!"

The plan was to mislead the Russians by pretending to build the bridges at Okholda, a fording

higher up the river. Three hundred men were sent there, and they made a pretence of building, with a few hammers and a lot of noise. The Jews, too, were told that the French intended to cross there, in the certainty of their giving the information to the Russians.

The plan succeeded completely, and on the morning of the crossing the French rubbed their eyes and stared. Not a single Russian was left on the other side of the river, not a gun visible! At first they could not believe such an astounding piece of luck. It was a trick—the enemy would return with redoubled forces. As time went on, and still no one appeared, they put on their equipment with trembling fingers. Marshal Oudinot's corps crossed first, and the watchers held their breath. Would the bridges stand the strain?

And chafing, still on the wrong side of the bank, stood Paul, watching his companions fade into the distance, ready to cleave the ranks of the opposer asunder, to prepare a highway for those who followed after. The Advance Guard! The words themselves are proud of being allowed to express such a meaning. Their depleted ranks mattered not at all. A standard is still a standard, even when it is slashed by sword-cuts, blackened and torn by gunpowder. And here was he, separated from the real fighters, told off to stand by some blasted wagon full of wounded officers. He could have wept with fury. The irony of it! All be-

cause his own brother happened to be amongst them!

And the soldiers passed, walking delicately on the foot-bridge, seeming to regain all their vigour and strength once they set foot on the other side. They gripped their muskets at the proper angle, they put on their conical hats at the jaunty tilt, famous over Europe, once again. And the marching rhythm came back to their feet, and the regular swing to their arms. Tramp, tramp, tramp . . . the crossing continued for the whole afternoon, and on into the evening. The engineers stood anxiously by their bridges, feeling every unequal weight as a burden on their own backs, and keeping away the vagrants who tried to cross with the regular infantry. The horse-and-wagon-bridge didn't stand the strain so well. Several of the trestles were placed, of necessity, on shifting, marshy ground, and occasionally they gave way, precipitating the wagon overhead into the river. Many wagon-drivers, seeing how desperate the situation was, preferred to leave their wagons, rather than wait their slow turn, and to take a chance at crossing the foot-bridge.

The foot-bridge became congested, and the land on either side a moving porridge of mud. Men fell, scrambled up again, and tore to pass each other, trampling each other under foot in the sudden terror that swept through them. Those pushed aside fell off in midstream, and lost con-

sciousness in the cold of the freezing waters. Horrible, murderous scenes were enacted, but no one had eyes to see them, each was out for himself, and behind, always behind, pressing on the crowded banks, came the non-combatants and Davout's tired troops. . . . The wagon-load of wounded officers was infected with the same terror. Unable to stir a finger for themselves, they implored Paul to give the word for their crossing, before it was too late. He refused shortly, telling them that he would stick to orders, and that he had been told to wait until the necessary army victual and medicinal wagons had gone first. They turned to Gervais; couldn't he use his influence? But he just closed his eyes and shook his head. His brother was mad, he assured them. They had better be patient.

The truth was that Gervais was obsessed by the idea that, having survived the time when he was lost, he had become immune to every kind of danger. He had lost his leg, and so he couldn't, under the law of averages, lose anything else. In reality it was an inverted fear, a result of the experiences he had undergone, and a common enough phase for men to pass through in those days. There were men following the army then who had become crazy in a night. They had gone to sleep sane, and woken up stark, staring mad. They, too, were full of strange theories. They imagined they had lost a leg, and hopped, keep-

ing the other sound one tucked up, or they thought that plotting was going on against them, and continually held a knife. One man was heard accusing the other of having stolen his wife, while the other kept up a loud, aimless laughter. These poor imbeciles were the worst drag on the army. Luckily, their lives were short.

Paul, watching the scramble at the foot-bridge and the clumsy accidents at the wagon one, smiled cynically. It was a nasty sight, and he was glad the Russians weren't there to see it. God, but he'd be glad to be on the move again, and to rejoin his regiment! He went to the horses' heads to adjust their bits, and the warm smell of their necks took him back, with a rush, to the stables at home. He saw himself, as a small boy, reaching up to pat a black pony, while Gervais sat astride on its back, his bare legs dangling, and the shaft of sunlight pouring through the open half-door. There were hens hidden in the corners of that stable, inside empty mowers, and the hoods of carriages. When Gervais and Paul hollered and clapped their hands, they flew out, startled, blundering through the doorway like blowsy old ladies caught in a high wind, all their petticoats showing. . . . He laughed as he remembered, and laid his head against the horse's rough neck. What joy it would be to be home again!

12

The Russians, having discovered their mistake, went full speed back to their first position. They were too late to catch the Emperor, or the active part of his army, but they trained their guns on what was left. Napoleon, hearing of this, sent back a brigade of German infantry, and Oudinot, on the right, and Ney, still on the left, got ready for action. The night was ominously still, and little was heard but the occasional whinny of a horse, or the muffled sound of hoofs on the bridge. No fires were lit, and there was no moon, but men groped their way down to the bridges, stumbled over the masses of bodies, and staggered across. But there were those who were too tired to cross, too tired to do anything but sit with their heads between their hands, and nobody lit their dying spirits with the spark of "Danger!" If they thought at all, they thought they would go across in the morning. And the Russians waited for the morning, too.

Paul had slept leaning against the wagon. He had told the driver to come and wake him, when the last regimental wagon had passed, but the man had sneaked over the foot-bridge in the night. Now, as the sluggard sun crept up, it cast a faint yellow flush over the entire landscape, covered as it was with sleeping soldiers. Paul, staring at the scene before him, thought it resembled nothing so

much as a battlefield deserted of all but corpses. Nothing stirred, even the faint wisps of cloud hung poised overhead, and the trees on the opposite bank, sheltering the returned Russians, were breathlessly still, the tips of their topmost branches gilded with a thin line of light. The river below held a surface of glass, under which the current ran secretively, endlessly. It seemed impossible to Paul, as he watched, that this holy stillness should ever be broken, that, in less than an hour perhaps, these men sleeping so peacefully would be writhing, screaming in the last contortions of death. The very dew, descending, used no discrimination towards them, but bathed them all in the kindly tears of morning. No sound came from the wagons, no sound from the horses standing motionless with bent heads. And the sun came up, slowly, slowly, setting the wheels of the world moving once more. An owl hooted on its homeward flight, and a bird chirped sleepily from over the river, three times, like a warning.

Somewhere down in Studyanka a cock tore the day's veil asunder with his defiant song, and the soldiers, hearing it in their sleep, imagined they were home again, deep in the feather beds of farm and inn, and smiled. Gervais heard it, lying huddled in the wagon, and Julie heard it, lying under one of the cannons of the rearguard. It was the first martial trumpet of the morning. Gervais raised himself on his elbow, and said to Paul:

"Any sign of the Russians?"

"No. There's a slight mist the other side of the river. I think they're sheltering in the woods."

"Well, oughtn't we to take the chance, and slip across?"

Paul turned to look at the bridges. They were both deserted. Through the trees lower down he caught a reassuring glimpse of the German uniforms. Perhaps Gervais was right. There would be a crush later on, and after all, it wasn't his business to stay and fight, but to look after the wagon he'd been entrusted with. He nodded at Gervais, and was moved at his brother's face, drawn with pain.

"We'll go right away," he said, and went to the horses.

The noise of the wheels, bumping over the frosty ground, woke the soldiers. They buried their heads in their arms again, to shut out the unwelcome sound. Once or twice Paul had to go ahead and roll them out of the way. They expostulated, but fell asleep again the minute they had moved. Some had died, and they were the most troublesome to move. Paul called to one man, more awake-looking than the others, to help him. "I'll help if I can come with you," he said, and the dragoon nodded. It was too late, at this juncture, to jib at corporals making bargains with their superiors.

There was nobody guarding the wagon-bridge as they approached it, and nobody visible on the other side. Paul conjectured that it would take them perhaps half an hour to gain the shelter of the German troops. Holding one horse's head, the corporal held the other, and they ventured on to the bridge.

The wheels trundled loudly on the wooden planks, and reverberated across the water so continuously, it seemed that every man not stone deaf on both sides must wake and hear them. Two of the officers inside were groaning at the jolts and jerks, and imploring him to go more slowly, but a terror was beating in Paul's heart, making him tug at the horse's bridle. He kept saying to himself: "Steady, steady," but a voice in his ear was saying: "Quick! quick! quick!" like a rifle shot. The bridge was interminable. At every step they took it seemed to lengthen out afresh, and the silence closed in round them, the eyes of all the world were upon them, as they thundered their way across. The roof of Paul's mouth was so dry that his tongue stuck to it, and the voice in his ears went on saying, "An eighth of the way, a quarter of the way, a half of the way!"

When they had gone three-quarters of the way, Gervais shouted to Paul:

"Hi! We must have been misinformed. There aren't any Russians after all!"

Paul didn't hear what he said, because of the noise of the wheels in his ears, but he turned a face as pale as a wax candle, and shouted back some joke in reply. At that moment something fell in the water below them, and the bridge quivered. The corporal began to scream, "God! God! They're on us!" and pulled at the snorting horse's reins until they slipped on the slippery planks. Shell and grapeshot began to surround them, and the sputtering of the wood, the splashing of water, and the whizz of the shells all sounded together. Every now and then a heavy gun shook the bridge, and the helpless men could see the smoke puff out from between the trees, after every explosion. But the guns were badly trained on them, because the firers were still half-asleep, and no real damage was done until they reached the other side, and were too close for the range. Even then, the shells still fell about the bridge, as if their anger was roused, and could not be quenched. . . .

They turned sharp to the right, and urged the horses to a quick trot, the corporal swinging himself up onto the shafts. Paul was about to do the same, when a sniper between the trees got him through the heart. The impetus of his run took him a step or two farther, then he wheeled half round, and the great lumbering wheels swept him aside. He fell in a crumpled heap, his cutaway

coat making a brave show against the snow. That was the last Gervais saw of him.

The first shells started the morning's work, and then the French joined in. Fire spat at fire from either side, and the wagon-bridge suddenly collapsed, throwing down three carriages into the water. The French, devoid of any shelter, made a rush for the one bridge left, offering a superb target to the enemy. And the morning rose, bland, neutral, indifferent to scenes of carnage.

Some hand-to-hand fighting took place on the Russian side, but, although the Russians came down on the French on the French side, too, there was no real fighting there. They were too languid to fight. They preferred to be taken prisoner, and die comfortably. Some unable to cross the bridge, but desperate, jumped into the disturbed water. If they didn't drown in the first minute or two, their bright hats were an easy mark for the Russians. The lost children of sutlers and vivandières ran in between the fighters, sobbing for their mothers. Their mothers, unharnessing the dead horses from their wagons, cried piteously for them, and the river flowed, and the sun lit the pale earth, and the fighting went on all day. . . .

13

The crossing of the Beresina terminated the army's existence. There was no coherent body of men left, nothing but a tangle of scattered fugi-

tives, flying for their lives. No effort was made to keep to a direct route. Some wandered down to Minsk, and encountered terrible things there, others went upwards, towards the old route they had entered the country by, but the most part followed the Emperor, a half-way course between the two, with the Russians at their heels. When Vilna was reached, although the town was well-stocked, the inhabitants refused them food, taking them for wild vagrants, and thinking that the real army would follow after. The famished men were too weak to take the things by force, and although they were starving, there was no time to stay and argue. They looked hungrily at the beer and flour and meat, and staggered on again; the Russians, following after, fed at their leisure.

Julie, still with the rearguard, had been able to do a little looting in the town, and, as long as her food lasted, was surprisingly popular. The men ate as they went with one hand, the rifle ready in the other. They even ate during the engagements, and Julie sheltered behind the cannons, impatient of the loss of time. The rest of the non-combatants lay low, too, hushing their crying children. One small boy, orphaned at the Beresina, walked unconcernedly about during the fighting, standing and staring at mortal combat with his fingers in his mouth. Julie snatched him away when it grew too close, and beat him, through some muddled impression that that was

the best thing to do. She did not like children. She was too nearly a child herself. When the engagement was over, they rose and hurried on, striving to cover as much ground as possible before the next one.

Beyond Vilna was a steep hill, the first sign that they were nearing the end of Russia. They greeted it with cries of joy, and hurried forward, but from a distance they could see that it was covered with debris of all sorts. Soldiers and vagrants still hung about the road, dipping into the chests and boxes as if they were lucky-bags. When the rearguard got within hearing distance, they shouted:

"What is it?"

"It's all our wheeled vehicles, all our cannon, and the Emperor's treasure chest!" The last words covered the ignominy of the first ones. After all, they were not to blame that the last horses had found that hill too much for them.

Before the rearguard had come on to the scene, Cossacks had reached them, and the strangest truce had taken place, while friend and foe squabbled peaceably over yards of Chinese silk, and rubbed shoulders delving in the chests for silver écus and gold pieces. Their greed had made them all forget the real business of war, and they had hurried on again, to fall under their self-imposed burdens, the desire of their hearts, which killed them in the end.

And ahead, vanishing always before the rear-guard, sped the remains of the army, driven forward at an incredible pace for so bruised and battered a collection of men. In three days they covered the seventy-odd miles to the border. . . . Panic was in the air, permeating every inch of their being. It blew them like a strong wind. They would have died, their poor starved, tormented bodies longed to die, but they were urged forward, crawling over the face of the earth, a forgotten fragment of an army which had made and broken Empires. . . . And the wily fingers of fear twisted into their hair, the cold breath of fear stiffened their faces, congealed their eyelids, until they were no more than half-blinded, leprous, filthy beings, who went on all-fours like the beasts.

On the last stage of their journey out of Russia, the fugitives made for Kovno. Like lightning, but without its immediate results, they took the line of least resistance. One night they passed by a wood to rest for a brief space, and Julie made her way into its depths to get out of the cutting wind. There she experienced a curious thing.

She had not paused as she made her way in, and had heard nothing except her own footsteps crackling over the sleepy twigs under the snow. When she reached a tree thick enough to offer some hope of shelter, she sat down there, wrapping her feet well under her overcoat, and cover-

ing her head in the grey blanket. Sitting there, and looking upwards, she could make out the stars faintly between the interlaced branches, shining like tears. She was in that queer, exalted state of mind that comes to people who have not had an unbroken sleep for several days. Everything physical becomes less real to them, and their feet move lightly over the earth, as if the laws of gravitation had given way to some heavenly law of half-walking, half-flight.

As on that night after Borodino, time and space slipped away. As on that night, she was perceiving something new. Only this time, she was alone. It seemed to her that an angel's hand lifted up her chin, supporting it gently, and that the stars, so infinitely high above, let down shining chains of fire between the trees, looping them up as she had seen them looped at fairs. A low thrumming filled the air, a throbbing of trills and arpeggios, on deep bass notes, like the music of harps. Still looking upward, she saw that the topmost branches swayed regularly, as if they were moved by fingers. The music came rippling down from there, surrounding Julie, faster and faster, until there seemed to be a thousand harps playing in the wood, and still the invisible hand held up her chin, and the low, tender voice, hardly distinguishable from the music, said: "Listen, dear Child, listen." And the harps throbbed and thrummed together like happy bees, like rippling

water over small pebbles, like the pure laughter of children. She never knew how long she sat there; for she seemed not to be sitting there, but to be soaring in amongst the branches, swinging from the shining chains of fire, rejoicing over the end of all pain and weariness. The trees were the harpstrings of the world, the wind was the harper. Together they were playing a hymn to God. They lost, in that moment, all their sinister characteristics, to Julie. She no longer thought of the naked black pines as of emblems of unbending hardness, nor of the wind as a malicious force. Both the wind and the trees were far, far above such little meannesses. They left them to men. They were careless, ignorant of the wasting and destruction in their midst. Even there, in that blind waste of snow, they were singing their hymns. She closed her eyes, and wept at the beauty of it, and all the birds in the world seemed to surge back into that wood. They left their warm countries, and came back, nightingales, swallows, larks, finches, beating their bright wings round Julie's head, bringing the scent of hay and poppies and summer things.

Julie thought: "I am having visions, like the Maid of Orleans. I have been chosen to save France." Yet, as she thought it, she knew she was wrong. It was not France that needed to be saved, it was the world. She wanted to shout to the whole world, and sing, saying: "Look, look

what I have found! I have discovered the secret place of love. I have been given wings! There are wings about me, and summer in the midst of winter, and company in a wilderness!" But the harping of the trees was too loud for her, every branch, every twig, was singing in the wind. The trees were not only harps, they were prophets standing with uplifted arms, reaching into the sky. Even the tree against which she leant was not still, but shaking, trembling from the mighty force that shook it, as if it sobbed and shook from the beauty of its song. Julie reached up her arms. She felt that they were being drawn up by the music, that she too would become one of that mystic company, and the stars rained golden sparks about her, catching in her hair like diamonds.

A drum, beating the fall-in, tugged her earthwards again. She stumbled out of the singing wood like a blind woman, and joined the others. During her absence they had eaten the potato allotted to her for dinner, but she forgot even to ask for it, and they all had horrible pains in the night, because frozen potato is very like glass. They put it down to a guilty conscience, and behaved nicely to her the next day, but could get no answer from her more than a vague smile. She could not come down to earth so quickly.

14

The steep hill at Vilna accounted for the wounded officers' wagon, too. When the horses

fell for the last time on to their bleeding knees, the men climbed out somehow, and continued on foot. (Gervais had had a rough pair of crutches given to him before starting.) Later they had seen a peasant's sledge approaching, and had paid him a king's ransom for it. In this way they reached Kovno, and there they rested. Rumour was running amongst the men that the Emperor had left them and gone on ahead. Gervais and his companions were too concerned with their own troubles to care whether it was true or not. They lay back with closed eyes, and throbbing, painful limbs, trying to forget that dreadful crossing of the bridge, and to avoid thinking of the journey ahead. One of their number had died *en route* a day after Paul's death.

The boastfulness had left Gervais now, and the old fear had come back. He dare not even keep his eyes closed for any length of time, but fixed them on the pendulum of the clock swinging at the other end of the room. Tick tock, tick tock. He wished his own heart would beat as steadily as that. Yet it was an insolent noise, insolent in its regularity, its regard for time, in a place where time was forgotten. Gervais' reason for keeping his eyes open was that, whenever he closed them, he saw pictured as clearly as a miniature the moment of Paul's death; the splash of colour of Paul's coat against the snow, and the way he wheeled round, with that surprised expression on his face, before he fell. The only way to avoid

that brutally clear picture was to keep one's eyes open, and think of other things. Yet, whatever he thought of was tinged with the thought of Paul. If he stared at the clock, all he could fill his muddled head with was a memory of Paul fiddling with their grandmother's cuckoo-clock until it cuckooed fifty times without stopping, and then burst its spring. If he thought of the campaign—of Julie—well, that was a different thing, because in a way he was bound to think of Julie, since it had been Paul's wish. Strange how death changed one's point of view! Paul's words, before so stupidly idealistic, took on a new meaning, and his desire for Gervais to marry the vivandière changed from a poor joke into a noble defiance of convention. Her presence in the household at St. Siriac might be an everlasting memorial to Paul. He hoped his mother and sister would see it like that.

He began to enlarge upon the idea. After all, nothing was impossible, and he might even gain a melancholy prestige by it. He was finished, as far as his profession was concerned, unless they gave him a staff job, and that wasn't likely. He didn't want to slip back into obscurity while his brother officers were out winning laurels for themselves. Heavens, he'd got most of his life still before him. Was he going to spend it at St. Siriac, limping round the garden, attending to stable-boys who stole things, arguing with the gardener about

the best walls for plums and pears? . . . No, it didn't do. Even now, when such a programme seemed eminently desirable, he could see that it might be impossible after a while. Whereas, if Julie were there, too . . . ? Might not the very spirit of the campaign hang over the house for ever? Paul's spirit, the spirit of courage, wasn't that sufficient to make up for any lack of birth and breeding?

Besides, there was no saying what Julie's father might have been. If he were to go to old Mother Gateau, and tip her enough, she could trump up some fine fellow, no doubt, with a handle to his name, and that would be quite sufficient. He could imagine himself saying to his mother: "You see, Maman, one has to move with the times. One is apt to get stagnated (no, perhaps that was a trifle strong). One is apt to get a little out of things, living here at St. Siriac."

The more he thought about it, the more he was inclined to the idea. In any case, it had been Paul's wish, and Paul's wishes were sacred, by reason of his death. Gervais wanted to make a rich atonement. He felt partly responsible for Paul's end. Hadn't the authorities put him in charge of the wagon because his brother was there? Yes, there was only one thing for him to do, marry Julie. If people laughed and sneered, well—he wouldn't care, he was doing what Paul wanted him to do. A white thought

fluttered downwards—a thought of Natalia. Yes, he would be pleasing her, too. In having Julie, he had her, for ever and ever. He shut his eyes, and was relieved to find that the image of Paul's death no longer filled the blackness. His spirit was appeased. He would glory in Gervais' self-imposed shame. Satisfied with the solution of his problem, he fell asleep.

15

By the time the rearguard reached Kovno, the rest of the army had already crossed the Niemen and were out of Russia. The Russians, who had made a dead heat of it with Ney and his men, sat down to see how the last French troops were going to get out of the town. The stores had been plundered, as usual, before Ney's men arrived, and the streets were impassable, because of the drunken men lying in doorways and gutters and paths. The one bridge over the river was congested all day long with those still able to walk, although, ironically enough, the ice would have held them. Their last vestige of reasoning powers seemed to have been left behind with the things they had plundered. They were sheep now, and followed their leader in the most idiotic directions. Once they were in friendly territory, a large number bartered their last loot for a place to sleep in and a little to eat, so that the real soldiers were apparent once more, when the vagrants and de-

serters had been weeded out. Their discipline had gone, though. It had left with their Emperor, driving full speed to Paris. They moved forward when they liked, and fell out when it pleased them, but they were still so weak that a stout German Hausfrau charged them what she liked for letting them sleep in her barn, and threatened them with physical violence if they refused to pay. So they paid. Money was the only thing left to them, and they had had enough of being knocked about.

But good food works wonders, and with it their good humour returned. They began to stop complaining about things, and to be grateful that they had escaped with their lives. They smiled at the children when they came limping into the villages, and the children fled from them, screaming. They were certainly a band of beggars, ragged and filthy. And as they went, they said to each other: "I wonder where Marshal Ney is? Poor fellow, he's really done for this time. Why, we saw the Russians bringing up their guns before we were out of the town ourselves!"

But Marshal Ney was not done for. He slipped out of the town in the night as easily as hot butter slips down a pan, and made his way northwards to Tilsit, and the Russians found a town full of drunkards, and nothing else. They took them prisoner, but with no real enthusiasm. They were still wondering how it was possible that the enemy should have escaped them, and

some of them ventured into Poland to go on fighting, but the French had vanished off the face of the earth.

At the bridge at Tilsit Julie met Gibeau again. He was regulating the traffic with his tongue. The traffic occasionally stopped open-mouth, at such a commanding flow of vituperation, and the congestion became worse than ever. Julie fell out of the line, and stood by him, marvelling at his chest, which was ablaze with medals.

"Where did you get them?"

"At the Beresina, my dear! Get on, you lousy lump of tallow, or by the devil's pig's-trotters, I'll give you such a thump with my boot!"

"Oh, then you've been rewarded already?" Julie was proud of him as if she was in some way responsible for him.

"I don't know about rewarded. I just helped myself," and he was off again, screaming with fury at some poor fat woman who went too slowly for his liking. Julie watched him, fascinated. She had only seen generals and marshals from a distance, but Gibeau seemed exactly like them, to her. She sighed. Was *he* going to become inaccessible too? Surely, if anybody in authority happened to pass, they would see what gifts he had for directing operations, although he was only a shoesmith. It seemed so likely, that she shouldered her bundle again, and was just going to fall into the line, when he pulled her out.

"Where are you off to, so soon?" he asked. She cast down her eyes. She couldn't explain all the silly nonsense she had been thinking, and he took her arm and led her away, sitting down on the bank beside her. She demurred:

"Aren't you in charge of the bridge, Gibeau?"

He roared with laughter, slapping his thighs, and showing all his teeth, then turned to her.

"My cabbage," he said, "they don't put shoesmiths in charge of bridges. I happened to be there, that was all, and they were making such a hell of a mess of it, that I had to get up, and shout at 'em. Poof!" He fanned himself in mocking imitation of exhaustion. "I'm glad I'm not a sergeant-major."

She was absurdly glad to hear him say it.

"What would you like to be, Gibeau," she asked, "if you weren't a smith?"

He wrinkled his forehead, staring at his boots.

"We-ell," he said slowly, "that's difficult to say. I wouldn't much mind what it was, so long as it was with the army. . . . My God!" he went on, "isn't it the only life in the world? It's people like you and me, Julie, who really live. We travel, we see the world. We don't die as ignorant as we were born! Of course, there's ups and downs, but there's ups and downs in any life."

"I suppose so," she said, her chin in her hands.

"Of course there is. There's the same risk, only in smaller proportions. Anywhere," he said,

"anywhere, you get friends, and you love them, and you lose them."

"Yes, you lose them," she said, echoing his words.

He stared at her, marvelling at the new sadness in her face. Somebody must have let her down pretty badly. He made up his mind. Looking away from her, and at the hopeless muddle still on the bridge below them, he said:

"Listen, Julie. I've got a plan. . . ."

16

Once the troops were well within Germany they were reshuffled into a semblance of order, and so short is the memory of man that in less than six weeks the depleted battalions were nearly complete with newly enlisted men. Already those who had come through it were boasting to the uninitiated of the glories and triumphs of the campaign, and making them feel they had missed something too good to be true. Those who were most to be pitied were the men who arrived home empty-handed. They could not make their wives understand that they should have been grateful to see them alive at all. The wives were obtuse beyond words. At all hours they would pick up the thread of the nagging:

"What I can't understand is why you couldn't bring me just a little thing. It isn't much to ask."

"I told you, my dear. It was as much as I could do to carry it as far as Maloyaroslavetz."

"George Debret brought his wife a beautiful worked shawl—"

"Yes. Want to know where he got it? Pinched it off poor Lamorge when he was drowned at the Beresina. The shawl I was going to bring you was a lot better than that."

"I daresay. That's a great comfort to know. What I should like to see is the dirty little hussy you gave it to."

"Me? What are you talking about? I told you I carried it as far as I could."

"Yes, and why couldn't you have brought it just a little bit farther? Nobody's to know you've even been over the frontier. I shall have the whole village laughing at me."

"I told you. If I could have brought it, I would. If you knew how cold it was—"

"It couldn't have been as cold as all that."

"As all what?"

"Cold enough for that dirty little hussy to need it," and so on, and so forth.

On the way to Königsberg hundreds of fresh wagons and horses were commissioned, and the wounded travelled comfortably for the first time since they started. The main part of the army went ahead, but some regiments were stationed along the frontier, in case of reprisals. Paris still remained ignorant of the actual result of the

campaign, even with their Emperor back in the midst of them. Bad news travels fast, and this was the exception that proves the rule.

The return to Königsberg in mid-winter was very different from the exit from Königsberg in early summer. It was not only the change in temperature. The people were colder, too, and more incurious than the soldiers had ever known them. They hired out their barns and stables and hotels, but there was no real enthusiasm shown. Even the young girls seemed to look on the soldiers as outsiders, and went their way with clerks or farm hands.

On the route many scenes of hearty recognition took place. Men who loathed each other in ordinary circumstances fell on each other's necks when they met again, and inquired tearfully after the rest of the regiment. "Little pests" of drummer-boys, suddenly recognised by older men, were lifted shoulder-high and accorded a reception kinder than they had ever known. Even the thieving old sutlers and cantiniers were slapped on the back by their customers: "Hullo, you've survived it, have you?" and a general air of bonhomie and hilarity cloaked over the cold treatment of the townspeople.

At nights the tall, gaunt trees lining the squares looked down on to the stragglers as they came in. Men with lanterns and flares moved like glow-worms, from barrack to inn and back again. The

cafés and theatres thronged once more with brilliant uniforms, and the same long lists of indemnities were compiled amongst the sufferers.

And all over Europe the wounded were returning to the bosoms of their families, and receiving the same strange stare: "Is it really you? How you have changed!"

Arrived at Königsberg, Gervais set out to find Julie. He loitered there a whole month before he had news of her. A precious month, that might have seen him at home by now! He spent several days of it trying to write a letter home, capable of announcing two pieces of important news without giving his mother a heart attack. Gervais was not a good letter-writer. When he had torn up the fifth attempt, news came of Julie.

He found her in the yard of a livery-stable, sitting on a sack of flour, writing things down in an account-book. Her head was uncovered, and the black hair falling about her shoulders. On her feet she had sabots again. She looked up when she heard his crutches on the cobblestones, and jumped to her feet, pushing the hair back from out of her eyes. Again Gervais thought, "The child! She *is* a child!" for she looked so unbelievably innocent and young, staring at him, her lips parted, her eyes bright. Slowly she put her hands to her breast, in the gesture he knew so well.

"Gervais," she said. "Your poor leg!" and

ran forward, beseeching him to take a seat on the sack of flour, or come into the common-room of the inn.

"No," he said. "I want to talk to you alone."

She led him into the stable, and they shut the half-door. The horses looked round at them curiously, their mouths moving in the contented half-circle of munching hay. Sitting amongst the straw, Gervais told her of Paul's death. She listened with her head bowed. Being there, in the comfortable stable, without the fear and anxiety that had been the very breath of Russia, the things they talked of seemed curiously remote. Paul's death merged into the other sad deaths of history . . . he belonged to the past, as Natalia and Sophia belonged to the past. The memory was as fragrant as old rose leaves, and as withered.

Gervais kept his eyes on Julie's face as he talked. He saw the last dying light of a winter day outline the edge of her cheek, as he had seen it outlined that first day in the Town Hall, and for the first time he was glad for his own sake that he had come to this decision: that this child was to be his for ever. He would take her home, and shelter her from all horrible things, for ever more. He would give her back the careless years of youth that her environment had stolen from her. He would see the soft light return to her eyes, the soft tones into her dear voice, that he

had seen and heard, however blind and deaf he might have been, at the Khovanskis'.

"Julie," he said, "will you do something for me?"

She turned her head away. Every time she saw him she loved him more than ever. Every time, her heart behaved like a silly, and went pattering faster than ever. And now he was asking if she would do something for him. Had she ever refused to do *anything* for him?

"Yes, Gervais?" she said very low.

"Julie—Julie. I want to know—I want you to marry me."

She bowed her head still lower, playing with a wisp of straw between her fingers. Between her fingers it was helpless, twisted to and fro, backwards and forwards, as she had been twisted to and fro, between the hands of the world. Gervais went on speaking, hardly knowing what he was saying, repeating himself over and over again, and still she would not raise her head, or answer him. He invoked the names of Paul and Natalia to work the charm he could not work, but she still sat dumb.

"Surely you're not afraid of my mother and sister, Julie?"

She shook her head.

"Then answer me!" His voice was high with anxiety. For answer she rose, and, taking his hands, helped him up. Then she took the lan-

tern from the nail above them, and lit it carefully from the one outside. Gervais thought: "She's superstitious, that's what it is. This must be some ceremony of betrothal." When she re-entered, she held the lantern up until it shone on his face, and looked long, long, on him, as if she would never see him again, then turned and led the way across the stable to the wagons which stood, with their shafts up, casting weird, spidery shadows amongst the rafters. He hobbled after her. When she reached the first wagon she stopped and lifted the lantern, until he could read the white board nailed to its side, shining with a fresh coat of paint.

"H. and J. Gibeau," he read, "Cantiniers to the Grand Army. Wines, Spirits, Tobacco, etc. Buy From Us. We are Cheaper and More Reliable."

Long after she had lowered the lantern, the words seemed to flicker luminously in the darkness: Cheaper and More Reliable. Cheaper and More Reliable. . . .

"What nonsense is this?" Gervais said roughly.

"It's mine." Her voice was so low he had to bend his head to catch the words.

"Yours?"

"Mine, and his. We were married a week ago."

"I see." A pause. "Do I know him?"

She shook her head. There seemed to be noth-

ing to add, but Gervais wouldn't let it go at that. His world had shattered about him, and he'd say his say.

"I'm sorry for you," he began, "I think you've been foolish. You had a chance once, and you let it go. You've deliberately slipped back into the mire." He laughed in what was meant to be a bitter way, but it sounded more like a sob.

"Who is this man? Some rotten little tyke who has gone through a meaningless ceremony with you, and who'll desert you the minute he lusts after some one else! I should have thought you'd have known your own breed better! But no, you're one of them, you'll always be one of them, miserable jackals following an army to tear it, tooth and nail! If I had my way I'd scrap the lot of you! I'd get a law passed in parliament to prevent women taking any part in warfare!" He stopped for want of breath. She wouldn't answer, and it enraged him.

"Well, why don't you answer?"

"I haven't anything to say, my lieutenant."

"Can you see what a fool you've been?"

"I shall always love you," she said.

"Pff! That for your love! Go to your cantinier! Marry and breed children, and steal, and lie, and turn into a hag like the rest of them! You can go your way, and I'll go mine. We shall never see each other again!" He turned on her, and took her by the shoulders to shake her, he was

so filled with rage, but his love was too strong for him. Julie out of reach was Julie doubly, trebly dear. She put her arms about his neck, and he put his arms round her waist. For the first and last time in their lives, they kissed as lover and lover. . . .

When he had gone, she fell down into the straw, and cried, and cried, and the lantern, flickering uneasily from the ground, illumined the painted board in fits and starts, as if to remind her of her lot in life. The horses swung their heads round, still munching, to look at the weeping girl. She had not listened to a half of Gervais' words, and they worried her less, but her tears were the last offering to the impossible and unattainable. She might have been the dear sister of Natalia and Sophia, she might have been Gervais' wife, but she was not their sister, and she was a cantinier's wife, and when she recovered, her lot would not seem so hard. . . .

She wiped her tears away on her sleeve. Some one was calling her from the inn:

"Vivandière! Vivandière! Vivandière!"

17

So the campaign ended; not magnificently, as it had begun, but vaguely, indefinitely, as if it died of sheer inertia, and nothing else. It was not only that the soldiers were tired of the war, Europe was a little tired, too. Here and there, in small

village halls, in the open air, in council meetings, speakers were promulgating a new idea. At least, they thought it was new; in reality, it was as old as the first Peacemaker. These men held theories that there was some other way of settling disputes, more economical than warfare. They had some faint groping after a court of international justice. . . . The newspapers made great fun of them. But they were an obstinate breed, and they held their own, even if they could make nobody listen to them but their own enthusiastic supporters.

18

Gervais' words were proved wrong. Julie and he did meet again. It was a year afterwards, on a crisp October day, with the smell of apples in the air. Gervais had been into Paris on some matter connected with his forthcoming marriage to Mélanie d'Aubac, and was bowling home again in an open coach. The coachman had taken a short cut through one of the market quarters of the town, and was now stuck in a traffic block, while a donkey-barrow and hand-barrow, hopelessly tangled together, were giving rich reason for bad language. Under the scanty shelter of the trees, gaily striped awnings and umbrellas were slung, while apples, fish, fowls, geese, and eggs were being bought and sold, with much haggling. Beneath the feet of the crowd and beneath

the carriage wheels, a medley of withered leaves kept up their shuffling dance, whispering and rustling together at every puff of wind. Gervais, bored with the altercation ahead of him, let his eyes wander lazily from face to face in the crowd, and saw a woman passing through it, with a baby slung to her back. The people were as closely thronged together as grains in a meal-sack, but something in her patient persistence as she threaded her way, now to the left, now to the right, pleased Gervais. It was so methodical, compared to the aimless wandering of the others, and so successful in the end, for eventually she had reached the fringe of it, and was climbing into the wagon behind Gervais. It was Julie. He knew her by the turn of her head, by the grave, slow smile she gave to the man who took the baby from her. Gervais turned, leaning on the hood of the carriage, and called her name, but the hubbub of the crowd, and the rustling of the leaves drowned him. He tried again:

"Vivandière!"

She looked up quickly, startled at the old name, and caught sight of him, and in an instant she was down again, and running to the step of his carriage.

"Gervais—it's you!"

"My dear!" He took her two brown hands in his. "What a lucky chance. I was on my way home."

"I hardly knew you in those clothes," she said.

"No?" he answered lightly, but the words stabbed him. What could have shown him more plainly how out of things he was? He went on:

"You're still in uniform, I see."

"Yes."

"Doing well?"

"Oh, yes," proudly. . . . "I've got a baby now."

"So I saw." (What the devil could he say now? This conversation was too polite for words.) Julie broke the pause:

"I've been hoping to see you for some time. I've got something to give you." She began fumbling in her breast, and drew out the crucifix, slipping the cord over her head, and handing it shyly to him. He stared at it, then at her, without moving to take it.

"But why, Julie? I'm sure that he—I mean I'm sure I would rather that you kept it always. It was meant for you."

"Please." She pressed it into his hands. "I want you to take it. I've wanted to give it to you, ever since— Please."

"Very well."

He fancied that he saw a look of intense relief come over her face once she was free of it, as if it was a millstone she had taken from her neck instead of a crucifix, and, suddenly, he understood the meaning of the whole affair. She wished to

renounce her memory of him altogether; she wanted to have nothing left by which she might remember him, nothing to disturb the course of her existence, as she had chosen it. . . . Yet it was not that she did not love him, but that she loved him so dearly. . . .

"Where are you off to now, Julie?"

"Germany again." There might have been a sigh in the words, or was it the leaves, whispering round her skirts?

"Of course. Well, we'll beat them all at their own game! Give a thought to me, sitting at home, when you're in the fighting zone again."

By now the donkey-cart and wagon were free of one another, and the coachman was climbing back into his seat. A broken branch, with a few black leaves still clinging to it, swung down between Gervais and Julie, backwards and forwards, as if to say:

"There. It's the end. Make an end of it, and go. You two will never see each other again."

Julie stepped down on to the ground again, as the coach began to move forward slowly. For one wild minute she thought that she must run after it, never let him out of her sight again. But no, she had grown out of that. . . . Gervais took off his cocked hat, smug with civilian trimmings.

"Good-bye, vivandière."

"Good-bye, my lieutenant."

They touched hands for a brief moment, and

separated. He saw her climb into the wagon and the thing start forward again. They went different ways at the next turning of the road. . . .

Once out of the town, Gervais' coach went more quickly. The horses cocked their ears hopefully, knowing they were on the homeward track. Gervais, leaning back, and still holding the crucifix in his hand, felt pensive and depressed. Yet not sordidly so, but beautifully, as if he himself were not involved in the sadness of life. He shivered a little, too, and thought gratefully of the crackling fires at home, the ministering women and good dinner awaiting him. And like a shadow across his own sunlight, he saw visions of the vivandière, and the comfortless life of uncertainty and irregularity stretched before her, as long as she lived, her only shelter that rackety wagon, her only warmth a soldier's greatcoat. The meeting with her had called up memories of the old campaign that had been almost lulled to sleep. All the way home Paul seemed to be beside him, talking and laughing, his tall hat set on the back of his head. And on the other side Natalia sat, her small voice hardly audible above the whirr of the wheels. "Gervais, are you really taking me home at last?"

Yet the other one, the living one, the vivandière, she went forward alone, far, far from him and from the dead, taking the old army road, the brave road of triumph and terror. He thought

of the foul words he had mocked her with in Königsberg, and shuddered. Had he said he would like a law passed to prevent women taking any part in warfare? He clenched the crucifix more tightly in his gloved hand. Then he had profaned the spirit of Joan of Arc. . . .

He was pleased with that. He said it aloud, looking up into the starry skies.

"I have profaned the spirit of Joan of Arc."

And the coach bowled on, into the engulfing dusk, towards Versailles.